



黎明の乙女と終焉の騎士

TAMAKI ITOMORI

F

vol.1

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Novel Updates

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—From right to left—

[Hibiki Mishima] A successor candidate chosen by fate. Will she become the conqueror of the world or will she become its glorious ruler? Or, will she create a new world and become its god?

[Louie Marvell]

[Fortune] The names of the powers he holds are <Infinity> and <Destiny>

[Olin] A newer god who governs over <Victory> and <Prayer>

[Silvai] A guardian deity who governs over <Silence> and <Wisdom>

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Chapter 1: The Forest Parade

The beginning is the end, and the end is the beginning. My story opens its act at the end.

It was a beautiful spring afternoon where the flowers and trees were budding.

“Are you going out, Hibiki?”

A sudden voice called out to me as I tried to leave the silent guestroom while holding my bag.

“Oh, you’re awake.”

I turned around and stuck half of my body out from the narrow space where you put on your shoes and into the hallway and smiled.

In the guestroom was Uncle Miharu, who was using our luggage as a pillow as he slept. He languidly got up, sat crossed-legged while facing me, and yawned widely.

“I’ll go with you. Wait a few minutes while I get ready.”

“Take your time and rest, Uncle. You were always working late for today’s trip, right? Thanks.”

“Nah, I don’t mind pulling all-nighters if it’s for making my cute niece happy.....and stop making me blush right after I wake up. I can’t let you walk around alone in an unfamiliar area, Hibiki.”

“It’s okay, I’m just going to look around the ryokan¹ for a bit. But I’d like to see the candle parade later tonight together.”

I waved back at Uncle Miharu, who still looked like he was worrying over whether he should accompany me or not, and hurriedly left the guestroom and headed for the hallway downstairs. The ryokan was built in the Meiji Era with a western exterior, and its interior design was old-fashioned and extravagant.

A refreshing breeze slipped in from an open window in the hallway and made me smile because it felt nice.

The town of Sarumi, which I am currently visiting during my spring break, was located in south-western Honshuu around a prefectural border. While the town itself was rather small, it was surrounded by the grace of nature and was considered to be a great sight-seeing spot that was only known to a select few. It was only about two and a half hours away from the heart of the city by shinkansen².

The manager of the ryokan was Uncle Miharu's friend from high-school, and he'd apparently been inviting Uncle Miharu over since way back. That's why we decided to come to here this time.

"I'm glad I came here,"

I whispered as I walked through the wooden terrace built in front of the main entrance.

The ryokan was built on top of a hill road surrounded by an abundance of trees. Behind it was a stream. I heard that, depending on the season, you could find rare wildflowers in the area. On the other side of the terrace was a stone path about four meters wide that curved gently along the way.

I stopped there for a moment and placed my hands on the decorated wooden guardrail. I saw the aging townscape before me. Many of the buildings, which had been built in a radial fashion, had vividly colored roofs and were adorable.

The buildings were particularly densely populated around the center of town, which was probably a shopping district. Scattered about a little way from that area were larger facilities like supermarkets and factories.

A thick forest surrounded the almost illusion-like town as if it was a miniature garden. Light pink was mixed into the green. It looks like there were sakura blossoms sprouting here and there. It might be nice to walk over there.

I adjusted my bag on my shoulder and headed down the path. The scenery really was nice.

"We should take pictures later."

This was about my fifteenth trip with Uncle Miharu. We've filled our fair share of albums too.

"Our first trip was to the park two stations away, right?"

A gentle feeling spread inside of me as I recalled my memories. Of our extended vacations in spring, summer, and winter. We've even went during Golden Week, when it worked out.

I was quite spoiled by Uncle Miharu's kindness. He'd carefully planned out each trip for me as I spent my days stifling. My parents hadn't talked to each other beyond the bare minimum for the past several years. Every day, our dining table was filled with an unnatural silence and fake smiles.

I don't even remember when the last time my parents looked each other in the eyes was.

I think they want to get divorced on the day that I graduate from high school and move out to live on my own. That's in three years. They don't know that I've realized yet and are patiently waiting for the time to pass.

It's not like they've abused or neglected me. I know that my parents are sincerely trying to fulfill their duties as parents. I know this so well that I'd almost rather that they'd coldly push me away.

"Then I wouldn't have to keep hoping that they'll reconcile one day."

If I really wanted to wish for my parents' happiness, I should tell them that they didn't need to hold back for my sake.

—*After this trip is over. I'll definitely say it then.*

I dropped my gaze down to my feet. I had slowed down without thinking. I promised myself this during every trip, but I'd never actually put it to words. I think it's because I'm afraid of seeing what kinds of faces they'll make after I tell them.

If they end up looking relieved like a great burden fell off their shoulders..... It made my heart feel like it was sinking in ice-cold water just by thinking about it.

I straightened up and shook my head. This time for sure. It's not like I'll never see my parents again.

When I looked up, I noticed that a strange group was crossing the crooked crossroad at the end of the hill path.

"Eh.....did the parade start already? Wasn't it supposed to start at night?"

I moved my feet in a panic and got off the stone path. When we were checking in, Mr. Kenji —Uncle Miharu's ryokan manager friend— had let us know that, "there'll be a candle parade tonight. The town will be lit up brightly, so you should enjoy it."

It was a festival with an old history to it, which had originally started so that the bride to Sarumi's local god wouldn't get lost or stumble on the road during her bridal procession. Today, it had changed into a lively parade with people in costume.

I looked for the procession I'd seen earlier after I arrived at the crossroads.

"They're already at the next intersession."

They were moving pretty fast. They seemed to be moving in the opposite direction to the center of town for some reason. There weren't really any buildings there and the forest started not too far away.

I suddenly heard the echoes of cheerful laughter as I was chasing after the procession next to a line of retail stores beside me. A man in costume accompanied by several children appeared from the side road looking like they were going to join the procession.

The man, who was dressed up like a clown, was playing the trumpet off-tune as he danced with springy steps. The children were laughing like they were having fun as they surrounded him.

He's like the "pied piper of Hamelin" who enticed children with his tunes—— a chill ran down my back as the silly idea crossed my mind.

They seemed to be heading for the forest as well, just like the procession ahead of them. I followed them slowly after a moment of hesitation.

The road ended and the number of trees lined up around me increased rapidly.

I became discouraged after spending ten or so minutes in the woods as the sunlight filtered through between the leaves. I wasn't familiar with the area. I might get lost if I wandered too far in.

I stopped for a moment to take in my bearings and looked back to the direction the clown had gone.

“.....Huh? They’re gone.”

I couldn’t find the clown or the children anywhere even after looking this way and that in a panic.

I found something strange instead.

“A bench? Why’s there a bench here?”

There was a simply wooden bench with a backrest in between the trees. I didn’t think that it had been abandoned there illegally. This was because there were several of them installed in the forest at irregular intervals.

“Are they supposed to be rest stops in the forest?”

My cheeks loosened before I realized it. I drew closer to the nearest bench and sat down on it after making sure that it wasn’t broken. My legs were a little tired. I let out a short sigh. I’d lost sight of the procession from before, but leisurely enjoying the ambience here wasn’t a bad idea. The old trees were covered in moss, and it smelled luxuriously of the earth.

—*This feels nice.*

I closed my eyes. The spring sunlight that covered my body was nice and warm. And still, the air was pristine. I should bring my uncle here later.

I slowly opened my eyes, and—

“—!?”

The scenery had changed completely.

It had changed from a gentle sunlight-filled evening to a world of night with a dark presence in the air.

I felt goosebumps appear all over my body. I hadn’t even been asleep, I’d only closed my eyes. And only for a minute or two. So how...?

“.....!?.....!!”

I tried to raise my voice. Then, I tried to get up. I couldn’t do either.

I'd been bound to the bench at some point.

—*No.....! It's not a bench! Its shape changed!*

I desperately moved my head in deep confusion.

I couldn't determine what I was sitting on because my eyes had not gotten used to the darkness yet. But I was absolutely sure that it wasn't a bench. The places that were touching my hips and back weren't flat and smooth anymore, and it was responding to my movements like it was alive. There hadn't been an armrest before, either.

And what was the hairy thing that was coving my mouth so hard that it was biting into my cheeks? I didn't think it was any ordinary cloth because its thickness was irregularly distributed.

—*I feel something like body heat. Is it someone's hand.....?*

I got goosebumps again. *I have to get rid of these restraints and run away fast* —an urgent thought flashed in my head and I was assaulted by an uneasiness stronger than fear. I didn't know what was going on. But, for now, I felt like I absolutely shouldn't ignore what I was feeling.

I struggled fervently. The restraints on my wrists and ankles became stronger as if they were trying to keep me from moving. My bangs threatened to poke my eyes, but I couldn't brush them away.

I started sweating buckets. Blood rushed to my head and my breathing became ragged. If I could at least get rid of the thing covering my mouth, I could scream and call for help. Thinking this, I poured more strength into my trembling body.

Suddenly, a candle flickered on before my eyes.

“!?”

—*There's someone here!*

I forgot to blink as I stared fixedly at the figure that was loitering in front of me.

“Oh, have my successor candidates finally been decided? Still, this chosen lady is rather young.”

The voice, which didn't suit the ominous darkness of the area, was disconcertingly bright.

The candlelight dimly lit the figure of the suspicious person who had said those cryptic words.

—*Is he in costume.....?*

The person who appeared before me was dressed in strange clothes.

For a moment, I forgot about the inexplicable situation I was in and the fear that I felt because of it as I fixedly observed the stranger. The stranger, too, shut his mouth and gazed back at me.

He had waist-long silky white hair that reminded me of winter. It didn't seem unnatural enough to be a wig. He was covering the top half of his face with a dull grey mask. His attire looked almost like a kimono, but not quite. His jacket sleeve was long enough to reach the ground and flowed freely. The hem of his clothes looked like it was longer in the back. Multiple layers of thin chains bearing small jewels were coiled around the sash at his waist, which was stitched with fine embroidery. His undergarment was comparatively slender and was of a similar color to the jacket. The light didn't really reach his feet, but he was probably wearing high-rise riding boots.

What kind of costume was that? It looked like an ethnic piece that was neither eastern nor western.

—*Who is this person? And what does he mean by candidates?*

It was vexing that I couldn't say a word when there was a mountain of questions I wanted to ask. I moaned in an attempt to signal that I wanted him to remove my bindings, but the suspicious person in front of me simply placed a finger on their lips and smiled.

“Silence! You've only been selected as a successor candidate as of yet. If you speak, the shell of protection I granted you will weaken and break.”

—*What do you mean by candidates and shells?!*

“Your world, and our world of Evelier. This forest was transfigured into the “interworld” where both worlds have melted together due to the selection of

the <Dark Seat>. Without my protection, you'll be crushed by the distortions of the interworld and trampled."

The world of Evelier? What country is that? I grew impatient at their incomprehensible explanation.

Maybe this is a part of the parade.....like I was chosen to participate in a test of courage or an escape game or something. I knew that something was off as soon as I thought of this.

There was no way that they'd tie up an ordinary traveler like this.

Glossing over my growing fear, I looked up at the person who was smiling and looking like he was having fun. I couldn't guess his actual gender, let alone his age, because of the mask was covering half of his face and their peculiar dress. His voice, too, could have belonged to both a man or a woman.

"You're looking around like a curious little kitten, but listen quietly to what I have to say without making a sound."

The hint of laughter in his tone ticked me off. I hated how he brushed off my feelings with a word as harmless as 'curious'. I was obviously scared out of my mind. I raised a moan in protest and pushed my body harder to undo the restraints binding my hands and feet. I kicked at something with the tip of my shoe, which I had managed to move just a little.

Then, I suddenly remembered about my bag. I pulled my gaze off of the stranger and turned to look at my feet—.

"!?"

All the hair on my body stood up at once. I was finally able to see what I was sitting on thanks to the candle that the suspicious person was holding. But, I would have been so much better off not knowing.

—*The chair, it's alive!*

That description might be a little off. It was alive.....in that it was made up of small monkeys, no larger than cats, densely packed into the shape of a chair.

The thing that was wrapped around my waist wasn't a rope, but the little monkeys' long tails twisted together. The things binding my wrists and ankles

were, like I'd guessed earlier, their fingers. As was the thing covering my mouth.

".....!!"

When I struggled harder, moved by my fear, the little monkeys turned their eyes, which looked like they'd spill out of their heads, to me and screeched in sharp, judgmental voices. The entire chair shook.

Then, as if they were punishing me for resisting, they scratched at my butt and pulled my hair.....

".....!,!"

—*What is this.....? And what are you planning to do with me?! Who are you!?*

My panic was apparently comical to him. The suspicious person held his hand at his mouth and stifled a chuckle. The candle moved with him and flickered unsteadily.

"You wish to know of my identity? Let's see, shall I name myself Fortune? I am one who will change your fate."

This person.....Fortune calmly circled around me as if he was trying to fan the flames of my fear.

"You were thus acknowledged by the <Dark Seat> which I have prepared and have earned the right to reach greater heights."

—*Dark Seat? He said something like that before, too.*

I desperately thought amidst my confusion. I couldn't grasp the precise meaning of his words. But, from what I could guess from the impression his words left me, I understood that he was talking about the chair I was being made to sit in.

"Indeed, girl. You sit upon the Dark Seat which fathoms life,"

Fortune said with such good timing that I couldn't help but think he'd read my mind.

—*Can he read my mind?*

"The name of the power I hold is <Infinity>. It is a great power beloved by the

gods at the heights of Evelier. Become my successor, and all things will bow down before you. Haha, the gods will never meddle, so there is nothing to fear. The covenant of inviolability holds between myself and the gods still.”

Fortune looked down at me as I shivered uncontrollably, unable to get rid of my chills, and slowly circled me again.

“For many long years have I endured this anguish! I should have had a wish and a vow I could never lose sight of when I was still human. But I was robbed of my past, robbed of my name, and what ultimately remained in my hands was the emptiness of a ‘determined future.’ Even time itself yields to me. I no longer feel mystery in the future, for I see through everything.”

He circled me one more time. The candlelight flickered like an afterimage.

“As such, what did I need to do to regain an ‘undetermined future?’ I know the answer, for I am who I am. I simply need to cede to another the entirety of this revolting power that even the gods acknowledge. This transition of power will surely distort the determined future.”



Fortune peered into my face when he returned in front of me and tapped

steadily at my cheek.

“And thus, you were selected. As one of my successor candidates.”

There was a hint of allure in his voice. Fortune’s lips curled up in a bewitching manner in the dim light.

“One man and one woman were chosen by me. How amusing it is that two such vessels that I’ve painstakingly awaited appeared at once. I wonder which of you two will inherit my power?”

Evelier, and the power of infinity. I had no idea what he was talking about. He didn’t seem to be talking about something along the lines of handing down a company or personal property like normal people would. In any case, I was barely able to understand that this suspicious person who calls himself Fortune had chosen me and another person as some kind of special successor.

“You may wield the power granted to you as your greed and wishes desire. Will you become the conqueror of the world, or will you become its glorious ruler? Or,”

will you create a new world and become its god? Fortune whispered.

“All shall be at your fancy. There is no limit to my power. But do keep in mind: the greed of man is an untamable beast. It never runs dry no matter how much it wants and wants and springs up endlessly like an ever-flowing fountain. There exists both infinity and space within man. It is unfathomably vast and deep. So vast, in fact, that it will inevitably lead to demise.”

Fortune absentmindedly caressed my throat with his fingers as if he was amusing himself.

“I see, so it was inevitable that I would lose myself in my power of <Infinity> and willingly chose for destruction. Indeed, I was unable to abandon my hopes for the future because I was once human. Though I knew that miracles don’t exist—it was undoubtedly my hope which became the despair that invited ruin!”

There was something truly pressing in his gloomy laughter, but that didn’t mean that I was about to take his words seriously. A glorious ruler, the god of a new world. It’s not like I was the main character of a game or something. I was

put off by the exaggeration and the absurdity of what he was saying.

My only wish was for him to take off my restraints. I wanted to return to the ryokan and make sure Uncle Miharu was safe. I believed that he was, of course.....but it's not normal for the sky to suddenly become dark in a matter of a few minutes. That bothered me, no matter how hard I tried to ignore it.

Did Fortune have something to do with that natural disaster?

There's no way that's possible! This wasn't something you could do with petty tricks.

"How rude, to call it a petty trick."

—Huh?

My heart leapt from my chest. He'd guessed what I was thinking even though I hadn't said anything out loud. There's no way.....that's not possible.

"And about this natural disaster of yours as well. It's only natural for the sky to darken. I've already told you that this forest is the 'interworld' where the two worlds fuse together. Even you can at least feel the distortions in the atmosphere."

—Wh.....what the hell?! I have no idea what you're talking about! Explain it to me more normally so I can understand!

I groaned. My fear for the inexplicable Fortune increased rapidly.

This, this wasn't possible. If it wasn't a nightmare, then surely—maybe Fortune hypnotized me and warped my sense of reality? I could accept that explanation!

"Foolish girl, do you think that anything that doesn't fit into your narrow definition of common sense is a silly illusion? Do you think that all of creation sits within the well of your knowledge without fail? To think that you wouldn't even try to use your head."

I don't need to listen to him, Fortune's the one who's not making sense. I started to feel guilty as I thought this, as if I was losing some kind of mental battle.

"You believe without a doubt that there will always be an answer to every

question you have. You are so firm in your belief that calamity will never befall you and in your ability to overcome any hardship that you don't even think to question it. You believe that there is no way that an unrealistic problem, a scary situation, will befall you. But listen, is your blind acceptance not the most unrealistic thing of all?"

I got pissed at his suddenly frigid voice. It was only natural that I wouldn't be able to keep my thoughts calm and composed when faced with his terrifying eyes, which held neither justice nor censure.

--You're just criticizing me on your own! What did I even do to you, it's not like I want to become your successor what whatever it is!

Fortune tilted his head sideways as if he heard the outcry in my heart and looked intrigued.....and somewhat disappointed.

"Hmmm, it seems like you're quite the contradictory selectee. The other successor was quicker on the uptake and expressed his interest in my power. And yet, in contrast, you would reject it altogether?"

The other candidate. It's possible that he was being bound to a creepy chair nearby like I was. I quickly looked around, but it was difficult to determine my surroundings with just the light from Fortune's candle.

--I'm begging you, please let me go! Let me go back to where Uncle Miharu is!

Was he safe? If he was in a worse situation than I was in—I found it hard to breathe as I thought about my uncle's gentle smile and my face crumbled. I couldn't stand the anxiety. I had to hurry and go back!

"Will you truly not wish for my power?"

--I don't need it!!

".....I see. It is a thoughtless decision, but it is the path you've chosen nonetheless. I don't mind letting you go. I did not appear before you to kill you."

Fortune lightly placed his fingers underneath my chin. His cold fingers made a chill run down my back.

"Look over there. You see the candlelight, no?"

A line of small lights had appeared in the direction that Fortune was pointing at some point.

"You will be able to return to your world once you leave this forest."

—*I can go back to where my uncle is!? This isn't a trap or anything?*

"However. Do not forget my warning. This forest is the 'interworld.' It is only because of my protection that you, a normal person, can be here without getting crushed. Additionally, the Dark Seat will condemn you the moment you cease being my successor."

My uneasiness grew stronger. So, in the end, was he trying to say that I wouldn't be able to go back after all?

"You must not speak a word until you clear the forest. Ignore my warning, and the path will close and you will be met with a long road of great suffering and the pain of loss."

—*Huh.....? So, all I need to do is to be careful not to say anything?*

It was quite a let-down. I'd been worried that there would be more bizarre conditions than that.

"You look like you think this will be easy. But I doubt that you'll be able to heed even this simple warning with how shallow you are. What will you do? Will you still return? Will you deem my power unnecessary?"

I didn't know if he was just being whimsical or not, but it looked like he was seriously going to let me go back.

"A truly foolish decision, Hibiki."

I jolted. Did he just call my name? How did he know?

"You will surely regret it when you realize what you've thrown away —now, go."

Fortune nonchalantly waved a hand. Immediately, the restraints binding my arms and legs came off without a sound. I hurried up and cautiously gauged Fortune's reaction. He looked like he was simply watching me off. He didn't feel

like he was about to reach out for me anytime soon. It hadn't been a lie; he really was going to let me leave.

Just as I was about to run, I remembered that my bag had fallen by my feet and picked it up in a hurry.

The light that Fortune had been holding vanished at that very moment.

".....!?"

Fortune! I covered my mouth before I called out to him. I mustn't speak a word. Something might reach out from the darkness to restrain me again the very moment I did.

I hugged my bag to my chest and kicked off against the earth as hard as I could. This forest, in which the moon did not shine, was pitch black. The only thing I heard was the loud noises I made as I kicked aside the wild flora. I almost tripped countless times because of the ruggedness of the ground. The insides of my nose burned. I was on the verge of tears from fear.

—*I don't want to cry.*

I roughly wiped the tears from my face with one arm. My pain wasn't something simple enough that a few tears could make it go away.

No matter how hard I cried, it wouldn't bring back my parents' real smiles. That's why I loathed tears.

I steadied my breathing and started running vigorously again. Eventually, I realized that the darkness was lightening. It had changed from the darkness of midnight to that of dusk.....as if time had flowed backwards as my field of vision opened up and I could clearly see the outline of the trees again.

—*I can see the ryokan!*

I could faintly see the building on the slope peeking out from the top of trees. A line of small lights was lighting the path as if it was guiding me there. It was probably the candle parade.

I could finally leave this nightmarish forest. This made me so relieved that I almost sank down to the ground.

It's okay, everything's okay now. Fortune and that creepy chair were probably

a part of the parade's program. That's what I wanted to write it off as, ignoring how bizarre that would be if it was true.

I readjusted my bag and looked to the ryokan colored by the candlelight.

Just a little more. Just a few more minutes and I can leave this forest—

I heard something like grass being trampled on from past the trees to my left as hope spread across my chest.

I stopped in my tracks and looked in the direction the noise had come from while clenching my teeth in fear.

—*What was that? A wild animal?*

Or, perhaps it wasn't a wild animal and Fortune had secretly followed me here. I stealthily snuck under the shadow of the trees before me to see what was going on.

—*Huh.....?*

I almost voiced my surprise and covered my mouth again in a panic. It was neither a wild animal nor Fortune before my eyes. It was a man I'd never seen before. Restlessly, I blinked.

Was he Fortune's friend? He probably wasn't Japanese, at least judging by his face and physique. He was really tall. What color was his long hair, which was tied nicely in the back? Platinum blond? It was extremely pale. His tanned skin was darker than his beautiful hair color. He was toned like a sports athlete.

My doubts grew as I stared at him, completely at a loss. Even if I had meant to be sneaky, the forest itself was too quiet. I'd stepped on twigs and pushed aside grass. It was weird that he didn't turn around even though he definitely should have heard me.

I steeled myself and stepped out of the shadows while purposefully making noise.

—*Can he not see me?*

The man ignored me as if I was just a part of the scenery. He looked like he was on guard against something and looked around his surroundings with an awful tension.

His strange swordsman-like clothes were in tatters. His bare, thick arm was riddled with scratches and covered in blood. It looked like he had just fought through a number of harsh battles.

He was holding a giant sword in his hand as if to prove it. The sword was large enough that it could probably crush me easily. I knew with one glance that it wasn't just for decoration.

Sticky clots of muddy, blackish blood were stuck on its glimmering silver blade.

The man slowly moved forward while looking around the area with upmost caution. His sharp gaze somehow seemed to pass right through me, so I guess he really couldn't see me.

His clear, captivatingly beautiful golden eyes caught my breath for a moment. I reached out a hand to him and was about to call out to him before I abruptly stopped myself. Fortune had warned me not to say anything. In other words:

--does that mean that no one can perceive me as long as I don't say anything?

What else had Fortune said? I think he'd said that I'd be crushed by the forest if the shell protecting me broke.

--I probably shouldn't talk to anyone then.

It was the rule I had to follow if I wanted to return to the ryokan. I hated the idea of doing what others told me to do, but it'd probably be better to do as Fortune said for now. The moment I stepped back, the man painfully dropped one knee to the ground. He probably had more injuries other than the scratches on his arms.

I held back the urge to run to him and hugged my bag closer.

It wasn't that I believed Fortune when he'd said something as crazy like this forest was an 'interworld' where two worlds merged together. But.....what about the one in a million chance that it was true?

Couldn't it be that the scene before my eyes was some kind of illusion created by the distortion in space? That this scene from a world called Evelier,

apparently from another dimension, was being projected to me like a heat haze? It wasn't fake, but it wasn't fully real either. I recalled that a science fiction novel I'd read before had a similar setting.

I'm sure this was it.

—*That's why I don't need to worry about his wounds,*

I whispered silently to myself. A small part of my heart stung.

The man suddenly braced himself and clicked his tongue quietly. He looked frustrated as he turned around. The feeling soon disappeared and he returned to his former, quieter expression. I felt his vigor prickling on my skin.

I couldn't help but hold my breath even though I knew he couldn't perceive my presence.

The man swiftly readied his sword evenly at the horizon without stirring the air around him.

At that very moment, molted white beasts that I'd never seen before jumped out of the grass.

They had the limbs of a tiger and the face of a fox. A line of light ran across the first beast that stepped forward with a grating growl—the man had cleaved it in two within the blink of an eye.

—*Amazing!*

I trembled, though I didn't know if it was because I was terrified or because I was impressed.

The man cut down the beasts in movements so agile that I hadn't believed that he could make them with his large figure. It was as if I was watching a sword dance. He was finishing each beast one by one without hesitation.

But then, he suddenly staggered. The movements of his sword dulled even as I watched.

“!”

My shoulders stiffened. Now that I thought about it, he had been kneeling on the ground looking pained just moments ago. He was leaping over the bloody

carcasses as he fought even now, but there were still five beasts he needed to defeat.

His rough breathing was audible even to me and made my chest hurt.

—*Is this really just an illusion?*

I didn't know if it was the beasts' blood or if the man himself was heavily wounded.....but the red blood dripping from his arm concerned me. I didn't know if I could let myself simply remain as a bystander forever.

I fretted as I looked back and forth between the beasts, standing still and brimming with murderous intent, and the man, who was having trouble breathing.

The smell of blood that permeated the air. The bloodlust radiated by the beasts. It was all so raw that I found it difficult to believe it was just an illusion.

The man clicked his tongue after finishing off another two beasts. He looked irritated at his inability to move as nimbly as he had before. I clenched my fists. He was having trouble finishing the beasts off in one blow, and the number of times his attacks missed were increasing. There were three left.

“!!”

I gasped.

A beast had managed to shred the man's left arm with its long, sharp claws.

The man made his next move even as his face twisted in pain. The tip of his sword gouged into the beast's eye. The beast jumped away with a fierce howl that hurt my ears. Capitalizing on that moment, the man closed the distance between himself and the beast as if he was rending through space itself and relentlessly thrust his sword into the beast's back as it attempted to fight back. Just two more.

He looked like he was pushing himself just to stay up. But still, he didn't have the time to rest. He pulled his sword out of the beast he had just stabbed and used it to prop himself back upright. He turned his eyes to the remaining beasts and readied himself to charge at them again.

—*Oh, look out.....!*

He slipped on a clot of blood on the grass and lost his balance. He righted himself immediately and swung his sword around recklessly to keep the remaining beasts at bay.

I turned my gaze to the beast on the ground from before and was promptly shocked. He hadn't finished it off. It was gathering the last dredges of its strength to lift its head and bite off the man's ankle.

The man hadn't noticed the beast lying by his feet because he was focused on defeating the two beasts in front of him. He had neither the leeway nor the stamina to divide his attention.

—*Please, look down! Please!*

I clenched my bag harder. If he overlooked the beast by his feet, it'd definitely rip off his ankle. And then, once he was brought down to his knees, the beasts in front of him would roar with glee and overwhelm him.

But all of this was just an illusion.

Besides, even if I wanted to help him.....it's not like I can cut down and kill these beasts like he can. And my mental condition is reaching its limits too! And so, I continued to repeat excuse after excuse in my heart.

The line of lights flickered in the corner of my eyes. As did the ryokan atop the hill. If I made it out of the forest without saying a single word, I could go home to Uncle Miharu.

In other words, I mustn't influence the 'interworld' in any way.

—*Then, should I just.....let him die?*

I was horrified at the question I had asked myself. Would I really not regret it if I averted my eyes to his plight? Could I really live with myself without feeling the slightest tinge of guilt if I said there was nothing I could do and simply walked away?

—*No, but! What should do!?*

The beast aiming for the man's heel bared its fangs. Its thick, sharp teeth would easily rip off his foot, boot and all.

Argh, I can't do this, I really can't! I ground my teeth and steeled myself. I'd

definitely regret it if I abandoned him. I wouldn't be able to forgive myself.

It might just be an illusion. It might even be Fortune's trap. But there was also the chance that it wasn't. So, I couldn't just quietly stay still.

Uncle Miharu would surely be disappointed in me for being cowardly too!

“——Behind you!!”

I cried out.

The man looked astonished as he turned around. He twisted his body reflexively and struck the beast that was still trying to bite off his ankle in the face.

“Look out, in front of you!”

The two beasts in front of him froze for a moment as they waited for an opening when I first cried out, but they immediately lowered their bodies and prepared to jump at the man, who had turned his attention to the beast at his feet.

The man stared at me even as he righted his posture. His eyes were a vibrant gold, as if they had the light of the moon sealed within them.

——*I'm glad I made it in time.*

This was fine. I was glad from the bottom of my heart.



Since they responded to my voice, it means that this isn't an illusion.....that all of this is real, right?

The man, the beasts —they were all alive. There were so many things I didn't understand, like how I didn't know why he was dressed that way or why he had a sword, or what the beasts even were to begin with—.

The man regained his momentum and jumped in between the two remaining beasts. His sword twirled like it was tracing a circle. He gave the beasts no time to jump away and tore open their flanks. Then, he twisted his body as if he was about to spring up and cut off the head of the beast that had drawn too close to him. He flicked away the beast's decapitated head with the tip of his sword and hit away at the remaining beast.

The man ran across the ground like he was gliding. He dispatched the final beast, which had slowed down considerably, head-on.

—*He defeated all of them.*

The final beast fell into a puddle of blood with a thud. A sudden silence fell over the area. The man's rough breathing echoed around us. A violent presence still lingered in the air. As did the thick stench of blood which pressed against my chest.

“.....”

The man moved restlessly, as if he didn't have the time to waste waiting for his breathing to calm down. He looked more flustered than when he had been facing off against the beasts, and his blatant change of attitude surprised me.

We looked at each other for a while in silence. I didn't know what to say to him, and I felt really guilty for watching him for so long before finally helping him.

His eyes were fierce. Traces of his fierce battle lingered on his body. I was suddenly afraid that I, too, would fall prey to the giant sword in his hands.

The man blinked awkwardly, perhaps because he noticed that I had flinched.

He looked at me with a million complicated feelings flashing across his eyes, as if he was looking at something that couldn't be possible— —as if he thought that I was the illusion. I simple continued to gaze back at him at a complete loss.

I hadn't the slightest idea of what I was supposed to do in this extraordinary

situation.

Eventually, the man lowered his sword, looking troubled as he did, before returning his gaze to me. He looked like he had resolved himself for something as he took a step closer to me. Immediately afterward, he suddenly fell heavily on his knee.

—*Now that I think about it, he was hurt!*

I broke free from my imaginary binding spell and hurried to the crouching man's side.

"Oh, um, are you alright?"

It might have been a stupid question, but I didn't know what else to say.

The man snapped his head up and fixed his gaze on me. He was covered head to toe in blood, but I wasn't scared when I saw him up close for some reason. Maybe it was because I could tell that he had no intention of hurting me.

And, his clear eyes felt like they were pulling me in. I was certain that he wasn't Japanese. His chiseled features had a distinct masculine beauty to them.

He looked to be in his mid-twenties. His looks matched the description of a good-looking man to the letter.

I slowly and steadily grew more embarrassed. I didn't know how to react because he was staring at me so ardently.

"Um....."

The man hurriedly looked away as he regained his senses. He opened his mouth to say something but scrunched up his face and let out a short breath instead.

"Oh, right, your wounds! Were you hurt!?"

I checked over his body in a panic. He was really covered head to toe in blood. His clothes were dyed black as well. I continued checking over him, ignoring his discomposure, and found that, as I'd thought, there was a deep wound on his bare arm.

"This.....was this from the beasts earlier?"

He tried to reply, but he began coughing before he could. I saw his cracked lips and abruptly remembered that I was holding on to my bag.

"I had water with me!"

If I remembered correctly, I should have a partly-finished plastic water bottle with me.

Uncle Miharu had always said that my bag was "connected to another dimension." I knew that I had a lot of extra stuff in my bag that I might need at some point that I didn't normally use. I'm sure most girls are like that, though.

I searched around my bag and finally found the water bottle.

"Here, drink this."

The man stared back and forth between me and the plastic water bottle, startled, even as he coughed.

I grew impatient because he didn't seem like he was about to accept the water any time soon, so I forcefully placed the bottle up to his lips.

He looked incredibly flustered for a second, but he soon began to drink ravenously once he realized that it was just water.

"Oh, wait, don't drink all of it."

He squirmed when I stopped him by raising my hands. He stared at the almost-empty water bottle looking sorry from the bottom of his heart.

I took out a handkerchief from my bag and wet it with the remaining water. Then, I placed it on his arm, which looked like it hadn't stopped bleeding yet. Next, I took out the complimentary towel I had received from the ryokan and wrapped it around his arm like a bandage.

I took great care to make sure that my facial expression didn't change, but my heart wouldn't quiet down.

It looked like it hurt a lot. He should really get this treated at a hospital.

The man had become so docile as he accepted my clumsy treatment that I couldn't believe that he had been fighting so fiercely just moments ago. It felt like he was a little nervous.

"Er.....what next..."

No matter how 'inter-dimensional' my bag was supposed to be, it wasn't like I had an infinite supply of handkerchiefs and towels.

I worried for a moment before deciding to wipe down his face with tissues. He looked a little uncomfortable while I did it, but I couldn't just leave it be because his face was red all the way down to his neck from the beasts' blood. It might have also been because I'd been moved to action by the guilt I felt in my heart.

"Now, what else do I have?"

I didn't need the digestive medicine or the vitamins I had bought from the convenience store right now. I didn't see anything else I could use. What should I do?

The man stared at me so seriously that I was losing my nerve. He was looking at me so intensely that he may as well have never seen another human being before. I couldn't help but lose my composure because I'd never been stared at so earnestly. His gaze bordered along romantic zeal.

It probably wasn't something as simple as love at first sight, of course. It felt more pressing than that.

"Uh, um, sorry that my treatment was kinda poorly done.I wonder if I have anything else..."

I rummaged through my bag again to hide my timidity. *Oh, right, sweets are the best curing fatigue.* I always carried around marbled chocolate with me.

"Here. Try this."

It'd looked that he had been surprised by the plastic water bottle. It was entirely possible that he'd never had chocolate before.

I shook out several marbled chocolates onto my hand and showed them to him. Then, I ate one to show him how it was done and gently pushed one into his mouth.

".....It's so good. Wait, what am I getting so happy for?"

My shoulders relaxed as the sweetness melted in my mouth. He had stiffened

up a bit at first, but his facial expression relaxed a little after he nervously bit into it.

"Great. Chocolate is good, right?"

His previously gallant visage changed into an unbelievably delicate smile. He was taller than me by far, and was undoubtedly older than me, but he was kind of cute.

I recalled the bigger problem at hand right as I smiled along with him.

Crap. I completely forgot, even though Fortune warned me about it so many times.

"Wha, what should I do?"

It wasn't the time to be so calm about everything. He'd said that my shell of protection would break and I'd be crushed by the 'interworld' if I spoke—but nothing's happened as of yet. Had it just been an empty threat?

"No, I doubt it..... I mean, this wasn't an illusion either..."

"_____"

"Huh?"

I returned to my senses upon hearing a gentle low voice nearby. Naturally, I knew that it belonged to the man.

.....But, what did you just say?

I stared at him. He, too, looked back at me with a strong gaze and repeated himself slowly so that it was easier to understand.

"_____"

I was at a loss for words. I'd never heard this language before. It wasn't English, and it probably wasn't French either. The words sounded similar to English, but it also didn't. No wonder he had looked so strange when I was talking to him. Or rather, his chiseled facial structures were so shapely that it should have been obvious that we wouldn't speak the same language right from the start.

"_____"

"Wait, I don't understand. I don't know what you're saying."

I shook my head to indicate that I didn't understand. He understood my intent and looked aside while furrowing his brows in deep thought.

Suddenly, he moved to stand up.

"You're hurt, so you probably shouldn't move....."

My words trailed off mid-sentence as the blood and the beasts' carcasses entered my line of sight. I felt like all of the heat had left my body. It had taken a while to hit, but I felt fear at how raw everything was —the kind of fear that could never have been brought about if it'd all been fake. Everything, right down to the smell of blood, was far too real.

My vision suddenly went black. Then, I brushed against an anxious pair of golden eyes. A beat later, the man used his body to shield me from the scene of carnage.

"Th---thank you."

The man turned his hand to the ground for a moment and pointed deeper into the forest with his thumb. He was probably signaling that we should leave. Certainly, I didn't really want to stay near the beasts' corpses any longer. That, and other beasts might be drawn to the thick stench of blood. Actually, this was the bigger problem.

"But what should I do? I really wanna go back to the ryokan, but....."

I looked up at the man, troubled. To be more precise, I looked up at him as he re-sheathed his sword. The first thing that came into my mind was that he would be in violation of the Swords and Firearms Control Law.

"I, I can't bring him back with me....."

Still, I couldn't just abandon him here either. I knew by the air around him that he wasn't a bad person.

--Nothing particularly bad has happened even though I've spoken quite a bit.....so I guess I'll just do as he says for now.

After coming to a decision, I put the empty water bottle back in my bag and slung it across my shoulder. The man was waiting for me to finish my

preparations from a distance that wasn't too awkward. I was silently impressed.

He was like those honor-bound knights from the Middle Ages. All gentlemanly and dignified. Plus, he was really tall.

Uncle Miharu and Mr. Kenji were of the taller build too, but he was taller than either of them by leaps and bounds. He was easily over 190 cm. In any case, he was extraordinarily tall and his chest was exceptionally thick as well; it was almost like he was a solid wall standing in front of me. His arms had muscle on them too, giving me the impression that he was well-built all around.

The reason why he didn't look thickheaded despite that was probably because he was also well-proportioned.

At about 155 cm tall, I'd probably only barely reach his chest if I stood next to him.

—.....*I wonder if I'll grow any taller..... I'd still like another 10 cm or so.*

The man tilted his head to the side in puzzlement upon seeing how depressed I'd gotten. I forced a smile on my face and moved to walk next to him.

“Kyah.....!”

I'd made the same mistake that he had a while ago. I'd lost my footing on the bloody grass and lost my balance. Unlike him, however, I was seriously lacking in the motor reflexes department and, unable to straighten my posture, fell spectacularly on my butt.

The man, who had been about to walk ahead, looked back in surprise and stopped moving. I was so embarrassed.

“I, I'm okay!”

It was only when I tried to get up that I noticed that something was wrong. I hadn't fallen over because I was clumsy.

A tepid wind blew over like a wave and made the leaves flutter. The color drained from the man's face as he placed a hand on the hilt of the sword he carried on his back.

“What's going on.....?”

I stared blankly at my boots. Goosebumps rose all across my body. The blood was writhing as if it had a will of its own and had latched on to my ankles.

“—And I’d given you so many warnings, what a troublesome girl you are.”

—*This voice.*

“Fortune!?”

I turned around in a panicked surprise. Fortune was stepping on a puddle of blood across from me. Only, he looked strangely transparent, like a ghost. And that wasn’t the only thing that was strange. The entire forest had frozen in time. Even the man, who had just been about to draw his sword, had frozen still.

—*What’s happening? I have a really bad feeling about this.*

“It seems that you don’t understand how thoughtless your choice was yet.”

“Don’t say I’m thoughtless, that’s mean.....”

“You abandoned your right to be a vessel to inherit my powers. And now, you’ve even cast aside the protection I’d given you. Know how truly foolish you are.”

A sudden chill ran down my back. I felt like something terrible was about to happen.

“It’s not like I ignored your warnings because I wanted to, that man would’ve died if I hadn’t said something!”

“This is why I call you a fool. A decision, once made, beckons fate. Yet, you’ve tightened the noose around your own neck. You will not be able to make your wishes come true unless you overcome love, hatred, and anguish.”

“E, even if you say that, it’s not like I could just leave him to die, and.....it’s not like I had any idea what you meant when you suddenly chose me as your successor candidate or whatever!”

I started to regret my choice, despite how unrealistic and unbelievable I thought everything had been. I started to think that I should have accepted the ‘power’ that he offered, even if I didn’t understand what it was.

"Are you starting to regret it? But it's much too late. You've already made your choice."

".....It's only natural that I refused! Anyone would, if you tied them to that creepy chair.....!"

"You would put aside your powerlessness and blame another when reality doesn't go your way?"

Fortune apathetically ignored my protests. He continued,

"you are worthless to me——ugh, gracious, am I to swallow this disappointment yet again? How tedious....."

—Again?

The blood clinging to my ankles grew stronger just as I was about to ask him what he meant.

"No, no way, what.....!?"

The blood swelled up like leeches and transformed into the little monkeys that made up that disgusting chair.

"That hurts!"

They jumped at me as I sat there, shocked. They scratched at my skin, tore my clothes, and tried to rip out my hair. Countless claws bit into my skin. Their saliva dripped down their mouths and their eyes were bloodshot.

—No way, this has to be a nightmare, or an illusion.

My mind went blank and I couldn't fight back. *I mean, it's too weird; there's no way that something as bizarre as this would happen to me. This has to be a dream; this isn't possible.....*

I suddenly recalled what Fortune had said. That I was so firm in my belief that calamity would never befall me and in my ability to overcome any hardship that I don't even think to question it——.

No, he's wrong. I just...

I unconsciously reached out for Fortune. I blindly believed that he would save me. But Fortune didn't move a muscle. I then understood that he would

abandon me. A sharp pain ran across my chest. It was cold. He'd said that I was worthless.Had my parents stopped smiling because I was worthless to them too?

—*Then what else should I have done?*

I'd do anything if it meant I could go back in time!

I desperately reached out to Fortune. Then, at that very moment, all of the little monkeys that had swarmed me were repelled at once. A clear, gentle breeze circled the area. As if it was protecting me. What on earth——?

“.....You would interfere? For Hibiki's sake?”

Fortune lifted his head and whispered at the empty space above. He sounded unexpectedly lonely.

He hadn't been talking to me. But then, who *was* he talking to?

Fortune returned his gaze to me and opened his mouth. But, in the end, I didn't hear what he had said. The wind blowing around me had grown stronger. It made a tremendous noise as it did.

Suddenly, a red sleeve came fluttering from behind me. I turned around in surprise.

“__”

He was standing behind me. He was hazier than even Fortune, who was transparent, and I couldn't see his face even when I squinted. I only guessed that he was a man because of his height.

That blurry image of a person held me from behind, enveloping me, as I sat there blankly.

As soon as he did, the wind that had gotten rid of the monkeys suddenly and vigorously changed its path. I found myself unable to keep my eyes open because the resulting wind pressure was too strong.

And, as the wind's howls pierced my ears——my consciousness drifted into a gentle darkness.

↑**Ryokan:** a traditional Japanese inn

↑**Shinkansen:** Japanese bullet train

Chapter 2: The Covenant of the Gods

Most people don't start screaming as soon they wake up.

But today, I had the valuable experience of learning exactly how it felt like firsthand.

“———!?”

I was rather impressed at how loud I screamed for someone who'd just woken up. I hadn't been able to form proper words, though.

“——What's going on?”

Someone rushed in from the other side of the bedroom door upon hearing the tremendous scream I had let out. But I didn't have the leisure to care about that. As for why—

“My, my ears....., that scream could destroy even a god's ears.....”

“W, w, who are you———!? Why are we sleeping in the same bed———!?

“My poor ears, they're breaking.....!”

In other words——I had apparently been sleeping in the embrace of a shockingly beautiful, but suspicious, man with brilliant blue hair.

A few minutes later.

I had crawled away to a corner of the spacious bedroom and placed myself far as I possibly could from the two mysterious individuals.

The blue-haired man was still writhing in pain with his hands over his ears on the semi-circle shaped bed. The other man with vivid, flame-like red hair was leaning against the edge of the nightstand as he looked at the former with pity.

——*Wha, what's going on!? Where am I? And seriously, who are they!?*

Everything was so wrapped up in mystery that my head couldn't keep up with my questions. For the time being, I held on to a conveniently close porcelain

water jug so I could hit them with it with all my might if they did anything strange.

—Is this.....the ryokan?

I looked around only to grow more puzzled. The room was somewhat old-fashioned and floridly decorated.

But, the difference between this room and the room I had rented with Uncle Miharu was like that of heaven and earth. It felt a little similar, but it was probably better to assume that I was in a completely different building altogether. Each and every decoration, and even the brick walls, gave off a solemn impression that spoke of its age. Also, the room was pretty large and its ceiling was really high up.

Next, I secretly observed the two suspicious individuals. They were dressed just like Fortune had been. They were wearing gorgeous antique clothing, much like the interior décor of the room—and having thought through all of this, I finally looked one in the eyes.

“Where is Fortune!? And what about the wounded man? And the little monkeys!?”

“Calm down, child.”

The red-haired man smiled wryly at my confusion.

“Y, you’re asking for the impossible here....., and what happened to Uncle Miharu!?”

The red-haired man swiftly got up and stopped me from running out of the room. Instinctively, I gasped.

He was huge. He was probably taller than even the man with the gigantic sword. His eyes were a vivid red, the same color as his hair. Upon a closer look, I noticed that he was wearing three swords at his waist.

“You’ll understand better if you see your situation with your own eyes, instead of having me explain it to you, no? Come,”

the man said and left the bedroom first, leaving me as I remained guarded. I hesitated a bit and followed after him after a quick glance at the blue-haired

man who was still writhing in pain.

Separated from the bedroom by just one door was a spacious hall that was larger than the room I had just left.

—*I guess this really isn't the ryokan. Is this some kind of palace?*

No, it felt more like a temple than a palace. On the walls were illustrations of angels embedded with stones of every color. There were decorated pillars along the side of the hall with the terrace. There was even a beautiful mural painted on the domed ceiling.

“Over here.”

The red-haired man, who had left the bedroom before me, cut across the hall and headed toward the line of pillars. There were no windows in the room. Instead, there was a wide stone terrace with handrails on the other side of the pillars. It allowed for a sweeping view of the scenery outside.

I stared blankly as I staggered toward the handrail. What I saw before me was ——.

“Do you understand now? Though an afterimage it may be, this is clearly not the <World> in which you lived. This is the holy precinct of the world of Evelier ——in other words, <Heaven>.”

The clouds shone with the luster of pearls. Or, perhaps it would be better to call it fog?

The dense growth of trees was multicolored like a rainbow. I gulped audibly. Evidently, this building was built on top of a hill.....a cliff. The landscape of something that looked like a town spread out below my eyes.

The circular townscape was enveloped by the abundant forest. It resembled the town of Sarumi from the side. Except, its beauty was in a completely different league from that of the town I knew.

“——”

“Child?”

Without a word, I sank down onto the cold stone floor.

"Are you alright?"

A few minutes later. The red-haired man was kneeling on one knee in front of me with a troubled smile.

"I'd like to let you rest for a while longer, but we probably don't have a lot of time. And there are a few things that you want to know, right?"

"This really isn't....."

Sarumi..... This isn't my world. The blue-haired man had appeared by the time that I had finished whispering the rest of that sentence blankly in my heart. He smiled and waved excitedly when our eyes met.

"Wow, your scream back there was magnificent. I'd seriously thought that my ears would break,"

the blue-haired man said lightly with a cheery smile.

"Let me say this before you start misunderstanding something, but he didn't crawl into your bed to do something bad to you. He was healing you.....or at least he was supposed to be."

The end of the red-haired man's sentence trailed off suspiciously. The blue-haired man, who had been called out on, simply smiled as he nodded.

"Well, I *did* consider laying my hands on you, just a little. All young and adorable maidens are like my brides."

"Cut it out, Silvai. She'll take you seriously,"

the red-haired man growled. I stared at the two of them blankly in turns.

Apparently, the blue-haired man who had just said something inappropriate was called Silvai.

His looks were so well-proportioned that it truly rendered me speechless. His blue hair shined as if it had been inlaid with shattered gems. His eyes were of the same color as his hair. His light aqua eyelashes were so long that I was actually envious of them. Plus, he was weirdly coquettish. He gave me the impression of a bewitching sapphire flower with glamorously large petals. It was the first time I'd ever seen someone as beautiful as him, regardless of gender.

"But Olin, it's not like I can do much to help it, is there? The ladies implore me to lay my hands on them regardless of my wishes, do they not? My own beauty and charm scare me....."

The red-haired man named Olin looked impressively tired as he watched Silvai lament.

Olin had very defined features and was beautiful in a different sense than Silvai was. Silvai looked rather androgynous, while Olin was masculine. Olin had looks that would draw him the envy of all the world's men.

There was no way anyone could stand before them and remain sane. They were obviously not normal.

I wondered if my senses had dulled because too many inexplicable things had happened to me at once. I felt myself slowly return to my usual self as I spaced out. It was likely because my feelings had shattered to the point that I knew that I had no choice but to just accept whatever was happening.

I fired myself up and aggressively decided to observe the two men. *Olin..... was he the one who embraced and protected me from behind when the little monkeys were about to kill me?*

And, the bright and cheerful Silvai had treated my wounds, or so I'd been told. While I didn't know why that required him to sleep in the same bed as me——for the time being I knew that my body didn't hurt anymore.

Speaking of which, and about time too, I noticed that I'd been changed into garments that were similar to theirs. I was wearing a long sakura-pink robe with expensive-looking accessories.

"Stand up, young lady."

Silvai reached out a hand to me as I stared down at myself.

I timidly grasped his fingers and pulled myself up. The illusionary townscape on the other side of the handrail. It wouldn't change into the town of Sarumi no matter how many timed I blinked. I returned my gaze to the two men, dejected.

"Um.....thank you so much for saving me. And for healing me and for the change of clothes too."

The two standing before me had probably vanished the little monkeys and helped me escape the creepy forest that had become the ‘interworld’. They seemed friendly, unlike Fortune. I wanted to keep them in a good mood if at all possible. I wanted to ask them what was going on in detail and I also wanted to guarantee my safety.

“How delightful. The dazzling maiden goddesses are likeable too, but a pure child like this one is quite lovely as well.....”

Silvai nodded repeatedly to himself and continued,

“all right. Let’s get married.”

What should I do? —he’s quite the regrettable person.

“Silvai, just shut up. Please.”

Olin sighed deeply and leaned against the handrail as he hung down his head. He continued,

“you’re always, always so..... This isn’t the time to be fooling around. We have to decide on what to do with this child.”

My shoulders stiffened. I looked to Olin carefully as to not lose my composure.

—*I have to keep calm. I have to ask them how to get back home.*

“.....Do the two of you know Fortune?”

A bitter expression immediately appeared on their faces. Their reaction told me that the answer was yes.

“I’m sorry. You were caught up in Fortune’s whims,”

Olin apologized gloomily as he righted himself. I hurriedly shook my head.

“Um, it’s not something that you need to apologize for.....Olin, and besides, you saved me too.”

I didn’t know if I could just call him by his name without a title, but he didn’t seem to have minded.

“It’s better to let him apologize to you. The origin of this situation started in the kingdom that Olin created,”

Silvai cut in, suddenly looking serious. He continued,

“and I want you to keep this well in your mind——”

His pure beauty suddenly became grave. I caught my breath as I took the full brunt of Silvai’s gaze as he continued,

“I am of a higher rank than this needlessly large man. I am one of the Five Noble Gods, and my beauty is so great that you can find no faults in it, yes?

So feel free to become my wife whenever you’d like.”

What should I do? —he’s really, really a regrettable person.

“Forget what he said just now, child,”

Olin interjected at once. Silvai looked down at me sorrowfully, since I’d just been about to agree to his proposal without thinking. He recovered soon after and smiled sweetly.

“Olin, there’s no need to keep addressing her as a child..... What is your name?”

“It’s Hibiki. Hibiki Mishima.”

“Hibiki? I see, it’s a name that shares camaraderie with the atmosphere. Which means that it is affiliated with me,”¹

Silvai said happily as he patted my forehead.

“Who are you people?”

“I’m Silvai. I’m the primordial god who governs over the wind and atmosphere. I’m also a guardian deity who governs over <Silence> and <Wisdom>. And let me tell you more while I’m at it. You’ll soon know of how great and majestic I am. My red-headed fellow over here is a god of war. He’s a god who exists for the people. He’s also a newer god who governs over <Victory> and <Prayer>. As a god of war, he was once human. Thus, his rank is low. At least here in heaven it is.”

“Am I supposed to thank you for your exaggerated introduction?”

Olin mumbled, exasperated.

“It’s important to give thanks where it’s due. After all, the other gods

ostracize you and say rude things about you, like how you're a savage or that you reek of blood. I'm the only god capricious enough to be your friend because I want to, you know?"

"They just don't like my origins, that's all."

"I don't dislike humanity. They're so full of truly amusing contradictions. Oh dear, I might fall in love with my own generosity..... Olin, you should cherish me more."

"U, um, wait a minute!"

I hurriedly cut in before the topic digressed too far. I continued,
"what do you mean by.....gods?"

I couldn't keep up with this conversation that I couldn't comprehend. Olin was bewildered by my confusion. Silvai, on the other hand, looked at me enchantingly as if I was an adorable pet.

"Hibiki, do you not know what gods are?"

Olin asked with an indescribably complicated expression on his face. I wasn't entirely sure how I was supposed to interpret that question.

"Erm, are you talking about.....like, actual gods? Oh, or is it some kind of code name for something else?"

".....Well, I suppose you *are* from another dimension, child."

Olin sighed in exasperation. I turned my gaze to Silvai instead, troubled.

"You can't blame her for being confused. Different worlds will have different gods. We are gods who protect the entire world of Evelier."

Silvai smiled tenderly as he stroked my hair.

"You said something about this Evelier before, and Fortune mentioned it to..... But I'm still not sure what you mean by it?"

"It refers to the land beneath this place —heaven. Your world and this one are two sides of the same coin. If your world is on one side of a mirror, this one exists on the other."

Evelier —a world other than my own. It was hard to believe, but just as hard

to refute. I'd already seen a natural disaster happen before my eyes. I'd also experienced frightening things. And I still was.

—*Why is this happening to me?*

"To begin with, all of this started with Fortune's lament,"

Silvai said with such good timing that he could have read my mind. He explained,

"Fortune, like Olin, was originally human. But, by an unlawful twist of destiny that resulted from a loophole in reason, he was entrusted with an array of powers even as a human. And so, we prepared to welcome an eleventh god into our midst. Given to him were the powers of <Infinity> and <Destiny>. But Fortune refused to join the ranks of the gods. And it wasn't because of some lukewarm reason like he too awed and afraid of the gods' presence. Some of the gods took this as an act of betrayal."

Silvai shifted his gaze and followed after Olin as he continued,

"originally.....it was an unwritten rule even among the gods that we must never determine the future. The god who governs over <Chaos>, the eldest of the gods, had decided that we must never lay our hands upon that realm. However, there were also those among the gods who were discontent with the ever wavering and unclear nature of creation. They desired an 'eye' with which to ascertain the future. Fortune is a noble existence who was born from that drop of divine greed."

I secretly took deep breathes so that Olin and Silvai wouldn't notice how terribly bewildered I was. Just what were they talking about; were they really talking about gods like Zeus and Poseidon from greek myths?

Were *they* really gods as well?

My head began to hurt. The sci-fi-ness of 'alternate worlds' was still within the limits of my comprehension. But it was too much for me to accept all of this about 'gods' too. I'd never been good at dealing with fantasy-like topics to begin with.

I drew up Fortune's figure in my mind. The mysterious person wearing a mask.

"The gods loved Fortune more than was wise. They spared no powers to grant him and even made a covenant of inviolability with him."

"Watch your mouth, Olin. One of the fools who graced that noble one with too many blessings stands right here before you."

Surprised, I looked up to find a bitter-looking Silvai. He looked back at me for a moment before abruptly looking away.

"It's almost like....."

I know that I have a bad habit of saying whatever I'm thinking out loud. But I just couldn't find it in myself to keep quiet this time. I finished,

"all of you were trying to manipulate Fortune's heart for yourselves?"

Olin and Silvai pursed their lips and looked to me. I was fully aware that I had probably spoken out of turn.

Silvai, who had been extremely friendly up until now, started to look displeased. It was scary when a beautiful person suddenly stopped smiling gently and looked threatening instead.

"Fortune was happy for our affections at first,"

Silvai whispered in a low voice with a hint of scorn as he gazed down at the townscape below the handrails.

—*That sounds like an excuse.*

I think I might have made what I was thinking too obvious. Silvai's refreshing presence suddenly grew heavy. It was too late by the time that I noticed that something was wrong. Silvai had already left with an empty look on his face.

I was almost certainly the cause behind Silvai's sudden change of mood. *I should probably apologize to him ASAP.* Olin stopped me, though, as I tried to chase after Silvai, worried.



"You have quite the nerve for someone who looks so innocent."

"I'm sorry. Silvai..... He's upset, isn't he?"

Olin looked to the direction that Silvai had left and made a mischievous expression.

"You're quite the girl to have driven Silvai away, even if you didn't know the circumstances well."

By 'circumstances,' did he mean that it had something to do with the 'gods' that they were talking about?

"I don't really mind what you say to me, but Silvai's still an ancient god no matter how easy it feels to talk to him. He's whimsical and generally self-centered. Not only that, but he's also fickle and will tire of things he's bored with regardless of the consequences. His personal pleasure is more important to him than the opinions of others. I don't know if I'd call him great, but on the inside, he's like an extremely young and arrogant child. All the gods are generally like that."

I soon forgot about reflecting on my actions as Olin talked to me so casually and ended up spilling out what I was really thinking again.

"That's really immature of them....."

"Don't say stuff like that to anyone else but me. It wouldn't have been strange if Silvai had pulverized you into dust back then, you know?"

"Huh!?"

Olin laughed in good spirits. He cast a sideways glance at me as I got flustered and then he leaned against the handrail.

His physical appearance aside, he felt very much like 'a normal person.' That was probably why it felt so reassuring to be with him.

"That being said, Silvai is one of the milder gods who has strong morals. Don't press him too far. What you pointed out struck painfully close to home for me too. After all, I, too, am one of the gods who poured their powers into Fortune."

I was at a loss for words for a moment.

"So.....you really are, well, gods and all..."

"Is it hard for you to believe that gods exist? Then think of it this way. We gods are 'troublesome rulers who have a few more special powers than humans.'"

His frank explanation did much to melt away my stubbornness regarding the subject.

I still didn't believe him completely, but I decided to accept his explanation for the time being.

"I see, so I'm talking to a god right now, huh....."

My serious whisper apparently had a huge impact on Olin. He was laughing for quite a long time.

"As Silvai said before, I used to be human too. The people of Evelier may worship me as a god, but deep down, I've never once considered myself to be some kind of supreme being. Actually, I feel like all of the restrictions the gods live by have clipped my wings."

I wanted to know what kind of world 'Evelier' was specifically, but Olin's tone of voice bothered me too.

"Do you not like being called a god?"

"I suppose not. It's not a compliment. At least not for me."

"I see. That sounds rough in a lot of different ways."

Olin finally began laughing without pause again. I felt like being able to be open and honest with him like this was the hard-won fruit of my labor. If I made even Olin mad at me, then I'd have no way to go back home to Uncle Miharu. I hid away these chilling thoughts and searched for out next topic of conversation.

"Your red hair is really pretty."

I really meant it. It was a color more magnificent than that of flames and more vivid than that of roses. It was longer than even my own.

"You've really been saying the most unexpected things today."

Olin, who had finally stopped laughing, pulled at a tuft of my hair. He

continued,

"this hair color of mine is one of the reasons that the gods ostracize me."

"Why? It's really cool."

"Both my hair and my eyes are red. And I'm called a god of war. Now then, can you guess what my red colors mean?"

".....Blood, maybe?"

"You're sharp. That's right. I was a bloodstained human who fought all his life. I've never been defeated in battle. In other words, that means that I've been showered in the blood of a lot of people. And so, my hair and eyes became the color of freshly spilt blood. It's no wonder the gods don't like me."

I tilted my head to the side. Olin wore a complicated expression of self-deprecation on his countenance.

"Was it a different color when you were human?"

"Indeed. It was blond. My eyes were green. I used to be called the king of earth back down below."

It looked like he still wanted to be called that instead.

"But blood wasn't what I thought of when I first saw you."

I turned back to Olin, who looked surprised, and looked at his dazzling and gorgeous hair.

"I thought that your hair looked like flames. And that your eyes were as red as roses. Don't red roses represent passion and love or something like that? Both your hair and your eyes are really pretty, and I like them."

Olin stared at me for a little while. There was genuine surprise in his red eyes. Even if he told me he was a god and not a normal person, he still looked like an adult man and a really cool one to boot. Having someone like him staring at me made me embarrassed as uncomfortable.

Olin finally laughed gently as I curled myself up to endure his gaze. I knew that he had mellowed out. I, too, let out a sigh.

"Hey, Olin. Fighting is scary, isn't it?"

I recalled what had happened in the forest and furrowed my brows. The man who had wielded the large sword and defeated the beasts. Was he safe?

I shifted my gaze from Olin to the town surrounded by the pearl-colored clouds. The townscape was as beautiful as a dream.

“This scenery looks so much like Sarumi.....”

“—It’s only natural that it appears as something that your eyes are used to seeing. This is heaven, a sacred realm where normal people are not supposed to be able to set foot in. It’s ‘a place that cannot be reflected in the eyes.’ And so, the land camouflages itself. But, in your case, you’re probably seeing a small sliver of heaven’s form because Silvai intentionally brought you out of the interworld?”

Evidently, it only looked like Sarumi because my eyes were playing tricks on me. I got a little depressed on the inside. *Then, I guess I won’t be able to find the key back to my world even if I searched the town.*

“But even this blessed land of plenty will eventually be reduced to scorched earth.”

“.....Scorched earth? Is there something wrong with the land?”

“Not wrong per se. It’s because of the infighting between the gods.”

“Infighting..... Do gods have wars too?”

“It’s because we’re gods that our fighting ends up becoming all the more severe.”

“Do gods fight because they’re greedy for the spotlight or for authority too?”

It was all so sudden that it was hard for me to believe. The image that I had of gods was that of beings brimming with merciful love and holiness, like Christ.

“I’m begging you, so please don’t let Silvai hear how frank you can be sometimes.”

I kinda found the way Olin was pleading to be somewhat cute. He continued, “if the gods don’t carry greed, then neither will man awaken to it, no?” Olin said as if he was stating the obvious. *Is that really how it works?*

"Then, does that mean that people have feelings like anger and joy because gods do?"

"Indeed. That goes for greed and other emotions as well. You're a clever girl."

Olin nodded with an impressed look on his face.

I vaguely remember that something similar was written in Genesis of the Bible. Something about humans being made in the image of their creator, was it? Maybe that's why our hearts are similar too.

"Do you want authority too, Olin?"

"I wonder."

I felt a little dissatisfied because he sounded like he was trying to dodge the question. He continued,

"but seriously, Hibiki, you really know how to hit where it hurts."

I decided to change the topic because Olin looked obviously troubled. *I wonder if it's alright for me to get to the main topic now.* I carefully thought out my words as I opened my mouth.

"This place looks a lot like a place I'm familiar with, but.....what happened the actual thing?"

I was worried the most about my uncle and Mr. Kenji's welfare. I earnestly held in my feelings so that they wouldn't explode, but in actuality, I wanted to run to them if I could even now.

".....I am sorry."

My chest tightened when I saw the dark look on Olin's face. He continued,

"the gods made a foolish vow, myself included."

I tightly grabbed Olin's arm as he let out his words of regret. The bad feeling I had wouldn't go away.

"Are you talking about the covenant of inviolability about Fortune? Hey, what's happening to my world?"

".....It's probably experiencing some distortion because the two worlds are connected. This world and yours are like the front and back of the same coin. If

one side distorts, then so will the other.”

“Are my uncle and Mr. Kenji.....and everyone around that forest safe?”

“Are you speaking of your family and close acquaintances?”

“Yeah. I was on a trip with my uncle, and then I saw a clown and a bunch of children in the forest.....”

—*What should I do?*

My breathing became ragged from anxiety. *Are Uncle Miharu and the others okay?*

“Will I——be able to go back?”

I implored Olin, breaking away from my fears. I mean, Olin was a god. He should be stronger than Fortune. Shouldn’t it be easy for him to return me to my original world?

Or so I had hoped, but Olin’s visage was still as dark as it was before.

“Gods have tremendous power, and they mustn’t meddle with human affairs because of it. Blessings and punishments aside. We cannot do anything else but watch over you otherwise.”

All of that sounded incredibly selfish to me.

“But Fortune chose successors and connected the worlds through the forest!”

“And that was where the gods erred. We loved him too much. We gave him so much affection and power that his human psyche could not bear it.”

Olin looked away in contemplation for a moment. I didn’t feel like taking the time to leisurely look at the elegant scenery anymore. Nothing would change even if I pressed Olin for answers here and now. I had to calm down.

“.....What is Fortune trying to accomplish by choosing a successor?”

“Silvai said this before too, but he was more docile at first. But, eventually, he began to doubt his role as a puppet of the gods and resisted his fate. He seems to have wanted to fulfil the wish he had back from when he was still human.”

“His wish?”

"Well, only Fortune would know what that entails.But he can't return to the world of man anymore. He now has the face of one that has deviated from that of humanity's. The people of this world rejected him. And so, Fortune wielded his power and punished them. He turned all of the people into living corpses."

—*Living corpses?*

I wondered what that meant. The first things that came into my mind were ghouls and zombies.*No way.*

"Fortune is immortal. He will suffer from neither age nor disease. But people age with the passing of seasons. Or rather, they walk alongside time. He rewrote that logic. He transfigured the people of Evelier into.....to put it in terms from your world, into beings similar to evil spirits."

"Evil spirits!?"

"Ghosts that can only live in a world of night. The kind that only harbor negative feelings, such as hate and antipathy. Those that have lost their ego and turned into revenants will wander in the darkness for all eternity. And so, the world of Evelier tread down the path of ruin."

"Wa, wait a minute, I can't keep up.....but, if that's true, don't you have to hurry and save the people!?"

I suddenly realized as Olin smiled bitterly. The gods were restricted in that they weren't allowed to interfere with people more than it was necessary, was it?

"Man must be the ones to save mankind. That is what the reason of all creation dictates. The species of beasts that humans meddle excessively with eventually decline, do they not? Likewise, if we gods grant humans unmerited charity, your species will eventually meet its downfall as well."

"But can't you make this an exceptional circumstance?"

"Even if we made an exception, it would lead to your kind being weeded out by natural selection anyway."

Olin glared into open space as if he was in pain. A sweet smelling breeze

passed through the space between us. Olin continued,

“.....then, Fortune planned to renounce his power. He planned to have another succeed his power as a means of retaliation against the gods who wanted ascertain the future. However, he could only pass his power to a <Vessel> who was compatible with it.”

“You’re talking about me and the other person, right?”

Olin affirmed with a serious expression on his face. I tightly hugged my chest. I was the one who had rejected Fortune’s power. But now I had clearly begun to regret my decision.

“Since you’ve chosen not to obtain it, his powers will be succeeded by the other chosen one.”

The other candidate. Fortune had said that he was the complete opposite of me. *I wonder who he is.*

“Fortune, who was no longer fond of the gods, came to hate humanity next, and eventually, he despaired in himself. His sorrow was so deep that it could no longer be healed. It was to the extent that it led to destruction.”

“Destruction?”

“It means that ultimately, he chose the path of destroying himself.”

“Hey, Olin. Fortune asked me a question. He asked me whether I would become a glorious ruler or if I would create a new world.”

“It probably means that the chosen one would have be entrusted with a choice—between whether you would return the revenants back to their human forms and allow this world to continue as it had been before, or whether you would extinguish this world without leaving even a trace of it behind and build a new one in its place.”

I stared at Olin in surprise.

“Wait a minute. These zombies.....the people who were turned into revenants can be turned back?”

“With Fortune’s power, yes.”

"So, what's the person who inherited Fortune's power planning to do?"

This was an important issue not only to the people of Evelier, but to me as well. I mean, if this world continued to exist, then wouldn't the distortions that happened to my world as an aftereffect of what happened here heal as well?

"But, it seems that the successor—wished for destruction and chose the path of becoming the god of a new world."

My vision went dark all of a sudden. *So, does that mean...*

"What's going to happen to my world? You said that this world and mine were two sides of the same coin....., but nothing too horrible will happen to it, right?"

"It will most likely slowly tread the path of destruction."

My mind went black as Olin gave me his bleak answer without even a pause to preface it.

".....N, no, that can't happen!!"

Olin gave me a sorrowful look. He silently stared down as I grew furious and caressed my head.

I suddenly grew irritated and violently shook off Olin's large and hefty hand.

"If you're a god....., why won't you help us?! You used to be called the king of earth; doesn't that mean that you used to be a leader of the world? So why.....!"

"It is *because* I'm a god that I can't interfere. I can't, no matter what."

My anger instantly died down upon hearing his strained voice. I had just heard the same thing earlier. He continued,

"that is why I give you my thanks."

"Your thanks.....? Why?"

"You were one of the children who were chosen by Fortune's power, no?"

"It, it looks that way, but when I was asked if I wanted to become the successor in the forest, it was all so sudden and I didn't believe in any of it. That's why.....I refused."

"And you were supposed to have returned to being a regular person with that choice. But you saved a man while you were escaping the forest, did you not? He was the last citizen of Evelier."

"The last citizen?"

"There were only two people left in my kingdom.Oh, back when I was a human in the world of Evelier, I was the founding king. I was the first person to establish a <Kingdom> in the world. Both Fortune and the man you saved are descendants of my kingdom."

"Hold on, you just said that there were two people left. Then why did you say that the man in the forest was Evelier's last citizen?"

"I told you that the one who inherited Fortune's power wished for a new world, remember? The 'relics of the past' need to be destroyed for that to happen. That goes for both infrastructure and the people—and unluckily, just as you met the man in the interworld forest, the successor also encountered the other person."

—*Does that mean they were killed by the successor?*

I was at a loss for words. I felt like my heart was beating right beside my ears.

"And so, Hibiki,"

Olin called my name in a soft tone. He continued,

"calamity shall not befall you if you remain by my side."

Did he mean that he would guarantee my safety if I stayed here?

"I want to go home; I'm worried about Uncle Miharu.....and the rest of my family!"

I was suddenly filled with doubt after shouting without meaning to.

—*He couldn't interfere with people other than through stuff like blessings because he's a god, right?*

That was probably why he was so tantalized that he couldn't save the man with the giant sword or the person who had been killed by the successor because of his restrictions.

"Then, what about me?"

"__"

"Weren't you not supposed to be allowed to save me either?"

"Indeed, gods are only supposed to be beings that watch over people. If we're reckless, our divine authority might cause more distortions in the world. But, we couldn't let you, a weak child from another world, to simply die. Both Silvai and I could not help but finally extend our hands—to the child who saved a citizen of Evelier in our stead."

My heart skipped a beat. Evidently, Olin and Silvai had been moved by the fact that I had helped the man in the forest. Now that I thought about it, I felt like Fortune had asked someone something along the lines of, "you would interfere? For Hibiki's sake?" at the time.

"It was Silvai who cut open the dimensions. I drew you over to this side. Silvai's the one who has to pay a large price—no, it shouldn't have constituted as breaking the covenant. After all, you aren't originally from our world."

Olin looked like he was chewing on his words as he whispered.

Certainly, I wasn't from Evelier. I suppose it was something similar to how you couldn't judge someone from another country by the laws of your own. But I was still uneasy.

—Is it really that convenient.....? What would happen to Silvai if he was determined to have broken the covenant?

Olin avoided my gaze and looked into the distance. *Shouldn't I be asking him for more details?* A part of my heart told me that I should, but I decided not to lend my ears to its plea because I was too flustered.

"Hey, there's something I want to know. My world and Evelier are connected, right? That's why my world is also being distorted because of the influence from this one....., so, if this world was restored, wouldn't my world naturally be restored as well? You said that it was possible to save the people who were turned into revenants with Fortune's power just earlier."

"Ah, you really know how to hit where it hurts."

Olin smiled sadly as I stared at him.

"I'm in heaven right now, but wouldn't it be okay for me to go down to Evelier because I'm not a god? If I helped restore the world.....as a way of thanking you for saving me in the forest and because it would be for my benefit too, I think it would be like killing two birds with one stone. Would it be really difficult?"

"You really are.....a troublesome child. Why was the person who crossed over into this world such a young child like you? If it had been some brawny man, I wouldn't have had to feel sympathy for him."

Olin furrowed his brows as if he was angry, but then he suddenly hugged me close while I was standing before him bewildered. I let out a strange sounding scream and struggled. I couldn't tell if it was because it hurt or if it was because my heart was pounding so hard! Getting hugged by someone else was completely different than clinging onto someone yourself. Olin continued,

"if only you were a little more foolish."

"Uh, um, Olin?!"

I fell into a state of panic. The arms that he had wrapped around my back were strong and wouldn't even budge. The scarlet necklace that decorated his wall-like chest waved before my eyes. I could hear Olin's heartbeat.

"Please let go of me.....!"

His arms finally loosened after I shouted. I was looking down out of embarrassment, but Olin purposefully placed a hand below my face and lifted it up.

"If you swear an oath with a god, you'll be held to it forever until it's fulfilled, do you understand? Fortune is a good example of this. You shouldn't say things like that so hastily."

"Then how about we list out what we need one by one so that it's fair?"

Olin blinked at my suggestion. I continued,

"you can't interfere with the world, but you can watch it, right? I want you to see if my uncle and Mr. Kenji are okay. In return, I'll return the people of your

world back to normal, Olin.”

“You fool. Weren’t you listening to what I just said? I’m a god too. If you swear an oath with me, I won’t be able to interfere on your behalf anymore.”

“Oaths are meant to protect something, you know?”

“You’re so carefree about this! You haven’t even thought about how much hardship this will bring you, have you? Saving Evelier means that you’ll inevitably have to confront Fortune’s successor one day. Stopping his plans and saving the people won’t be an easy task. You’ll be hated by the successor and the revenants will attack you. You don’t have to take on such painful toils.”

“But do you have anyone else you can ask? I doubt that too many people come here to begin with.”

“Look here, you.....”

“Besides, I won’t be able to go back to my world if things stand as they are, right?”

“—It’s possible for you to go to Evelier, but your world....., no, it’s not impossible; it’s possible if you wrenched open the interworld that Fortune created, probably.”

“Probably?”

“It would rip a large hole between the dimensions and a lot of my people who were turned into revenants would flood into your world at once. If that were to happen, the two worlds would travel further down the path of chaos.”

“Then I can’t go back until this world returns to normal after all.”

I had expected that this would be the case, but I still got depressed as I learned about this cruel truth. I continued,

“am I useless? Is it because I look weak? But if nothing happens, both you and I will be troubled, Olin. My uncle and Mr. Kenji won’t be saved, and the people of this world won’t return to being human.”

I checked on Olin’s reaction as I spoke. I continued,

“the successor wants to destroy the world of Evelier and become the god of a

new one, right? Wouldn't that spell trouble for the other gods too? But the gods can't stop him even if they wanted to, the only thing they can do is look on, because the covenant of inviolability is getting in their way. The successor has Fortune's power, after all."

"You got me."

Olin roughly ran his fingers through his hair in defeat. He continued, "it's just as you've said. Even the gods can't welcome Fortune's actions with open arms. It's because it wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that we gods exist because of the genuine faith of the people of Evelier. We would lose both our support and the place where we belong if a new world and a new god were to be born. We can't overlook this, but we're also obstructed by our foolish oath."

Did he mean that gods were kept alive by the people's faith? Would they die if they were forgotten? I wanted to ask him for more details but I felt like I shouldn't. I peeked at Olin in his melancholy from the side of my as I reorganized the contents of our conversation in my head.

The people of Evelier were passionate about their faith, and it was probably an important part of their daily lives. Kind of like how Japanese people visit Shinto shrines on New Year's.

But, if all of the people who cherished the gods and offered prayers to them died off, the new god—Fortune's successor—would purge the original world's culture, religion, and daily habits and then create a new world, and if that happened, Olin and the other gods would become meaningless. I mean, the people living in the new world would almost certainly worship the successor as their god.

I felt like it was kind of like the religious wars of the Middle Ages. A confrontation between the old gods and the new. When one side was defeated, they would be denounced as heretics and heathens and forced under severe oppression until they died out.

—Though, all of this is based off of what I heard Uncle say as he watched foreign news channels.

I shook away the thoughts in my head and put my resolution into words.

"I'll do it. I can still go down to Evelier, right?"

Olin looked distressed and gave out a large sigh as soon as I said that.

"Do you really understand how dangerous that is?"

"Yeah, I do."

Olin looked on at me in distress as I nodded. Then, overcome with emotion, he embraced me again.

"That hurts!"

It actually didn't hurt that much, but I was so embarrassed that I couldn't help myself.

Olin released me from his hold in a panic.

"So, what do I need to do?"

I let out a deep sigh in order to cool down my burning cheeks. Olin became flustered, perhaps because he mistakenly thought that I was disgruntled when I turned away from him, and gently pulled me in by the shoulder. And just then.

"—You two have grown considerably close, haven't you?"

Both Olin and I turned around as we heard a sullen voice echo from nearby.

Silvai was looking at us coldly as he leaned against one of the pillars with his arms crossed.

I hadn't noticed him; just how long was he standing there for?

"Have you two been having fun scorning the gods together?"

Olin smiled wryly at Silvai's thorny words.

"Don't sulk like that."

"That's preposterous."

Silvai furrowed his brows and turned away in irritation. He kind of really was like a selfish child.

"Silvai, I'm sorry about before."

Silvai brushed back his fine hair and threw a glance at me, still looking

discontent. *Oh, it looks like he's still upset.* His beauty really amplified the impact of his displeasure.

"What's this with getting more attached to someone who only has his physique going for him than me?"

Silvai murmured in aggravation.

Olin and I both froze up for a moment. Wasn't that the wrong thing to be upset about?

Besides, it was really mean.....to say that Olin only had his physique going for him. I felt a little sorry for him.

Olin seemed to have taken offense at that, since the edges of his lips twisted and he looked to Silvai in protest. As if in response, Silvai said,

"humans are creatures who don't know how to measure real worth. Bigger isn't always better, you know?"

Olin quivered for a moment. *What should I do,* I felt like the air had grown cold all of a sudden and the mood had started to become dangerous. It wasn't as if I could agree with Silvai's sarcastic words, but then again, his mood would grow worse if I denied them. Silvai continued,

"I have superior rank, power, and looks."

Wow, Silvai, you're really saying everything that you shouldn't be right there.

"—That's why you'll receive *my* blessing first, yes?"

"Blessing?"

"You mustn't!"

Olin's anger evaporated as he called out in sharp panic.

"Hush, you, I'm allowed to do whatever I want, no?"

Silvai laughed unkindly and threw his gaze over at Olin, who was trembling.

"You mustn't bless that child."

Silvai snorted as if he was making fun of Olin as he grimaced.

I could do nothing but stand there in shock because I didn't know what they

meant by ‘blessing’. Why was Olin panicking so much?

“But you plan on sending Hibiki down to earth, are you not?”

“—Were you eavesdropping?”

Olin growled, looking like he would click his tongue any minute. Apparently, they were talking about something that had to do with me.

“.....Um.”

Silvai pulled me close by an arm when I timidly tried to cut in and smiled at me gently.

“She’s a young and pure child who was born in a peaceful nation and doesn’t know the first thing about either sword or sorcery. And yet, you would send her down to a world ravaged by darkness all alone without granting her even a single blessing? That would be no different than sending her off to die. It’s a sinful thing to do, even for a god.”

Sinful.....? And, sorcery?

I looked up at Silvai in confusion. His long, aqua eyelashes slowly moved up and down. A somewhat heartbreaking color alighted his two jewel-like eyes.

“Hibiki, you unfortunately don’t know how to fight, right?”

“.....Yeah.”

I wasn’t some kind of savior overflowing with talent who had been chosen by the gods. Instead, hadn’t I been abandoned by Fortune after I made a mistake because I didn’t think things through when I couldn’t accept the reality of the situation? I had readily declared to Olin that I’d do it, but in actuality I didn’t have even the slightest clue about what I had to do.

“In order to turn the revenants back human——you have to kill them once.”

“Huh? I have to what.....?”

“Do you really think you can bear to do something so cruel?”

—*Kill them?*

“What do you mean.....?”

“Ordinary magic or sorcery won’t stand a chance against the large-scale spell that Fortune cast on the people—the world of Evelier. Well, it *is* just barely possible to annihilate a revenant with regular sorcery or magic, or if you cut through it with a sword, but that would mean destroying even the soul, the core that makes up a ‘person’. But they won’t just stand there and wait for you to destroy them. They will try to devour any living human they capture. If you can’t fight back, they’ll swallow you and you will turn into a revenant as well.”

“Then, are you saying that it’s impossible for me to save everyone.....?”

I felt like all the strength was leaving my body. *Am I useless?*

Silvai gave me a playful smile as I fell despondent.

“But, I’ve grown quite fond of you, miss.”

“Silvai.....?”

“By the way, regarding the one you call your uncle...”

“Uncle Miharu!?”

I yelled without thinking and clung tightly to Silvai.

Silvai happily picked me up with both arms for some reason.

“Hmm. The strain cause by the interworld spread in your world and caused some flooding. A water vein was greatly disrupted. It probably has something to do with the fact that Evelier is currently suffering a drought. The two worlds influence one another, after all.”

“What about my uncle? Are he and Mr. Kenji safe? And—my parents!?”

“They’re all safe. Well, the one called Kenji was wounded slightly from the vibrations of the earth, but it shouldn’t be a serious matter.”

I felt like my chest was burning as my joy and relief melded together.

“Thank you.....!”

I couldn’t find any other word to say. *I’m so happy I don’t know what to do.*

I can bear anything as long as Uncle Miharu and my parents are alive. Thank goodness, I’m so glad they’re okay.

Silvai pat me slowly on the back while laughing gently as I trembled with emotion.

Even though I'd said something horrible to him earlier.

—*He isn't self-centered at all; he's warm and caring.*

He was a kind god. He had saved me instead of leaving me to die. And on top of that, he had let me know that my loved ones were safe.

—*Then, it's my turn this time. I'll repay him for his kindness.*

"It's all right. Fortune's error can be traced back to us. It's too selfish of us to ask you to shoulder the gods' atonement. You will be allowed to stay in heaven on the virtue of having saved a citizen of Evelier."

"I like both you and Olin. That's why I want to make you a promise. I'll do my best to turn everyone back to normal so Evelier can be revived."

I felt Silvai sigh as he tightened his arms around me.

"While I don't like the fact that you put me on the same level as Olin....."

Hey, I heard Olin say in exasperation.

"I won't forget the two of you even if I turn into a revenant or something."

Silvai smiled mischievously right as I finished making my promise. He drew his face closer in what I could really only call a surprise attack.

I felt something soft on my forehead before I could say anything.

"Silvai!!"

Olin yelled in shock.

"Wha, what was that!?"

I let out a pathetic scream a little after. I stumbled back a few steps and pressed down on my forehead as I blushed furiously. Silvai, who had just done something outrageously indecent, was laughing in good sport at our reactions.

"Silvai! What are you doing all of a....."

Ah! My forehead began burning out of nowhere. The heat swirled with my forehead at its center and it hurt so much that I shivered for a moment.

“Wha.....!”

I felt like something had split open my forehead and awakened. *What’s going on?!*

I stiffened up at this sudden change and pressed down hard against my forehead.

“Silvai, you...!”

The world spun violently around me. A mass of flames danced in ecstasy like a living being within my body.

“I’ve taken a liking to this child. And—–as I’d thought, it seems that the oath of inviolability won’t overlook what I’ve done. If I’m to be judged anyway, I might as well grant this young lady the greatest blessing I can.”



I felt like Silvai's voice had grown far away. He continued,

“I’ll leave the rest to you.”

“Wait, Silvai!”

Silvai swiftly pushed me into Olin’s arms while I was still unable to look up from the pain.

I endured severe vertigo as I looked for Silvai’s figure. At first, I mistakenly thought that Silvai looked hazy because my head was still spinning so much. But then, I realized that I was wrong.

“What, a thousand years of sleep will pass in but a moment. I suppose sleeping beauty is now a god instead of a princess.....? I’m sure I’m beautiful even with my eyes closed. The first thing I want to see when I wake up is a cute maiden.”

A sharp, geometrical cage of silver appeared in Silvai’s vicinity as he bragged about himself with a faint smile on his face. The strange cage moved swiftly as if it was forming a circle with Silvai at its center. It expanded into a large elliptical shape for a moment until it suddenly shrunk around Silvai, who was standing inside of it, as if it was trying to strangle him to death.

“Silvai!”

The malicious cage cut Silvai apart at the same time that Olin’s heartbreakingly scream echoed around us. In the next moment, Silvai disappeared like falling petals.

The silence returned soon. I couldn’t see either Silvai or the silver cage anywhere. It had all been so abrupt that it was almost like Silvai had only been an illusion to begin with.

“Silvai.....?”

I became anxious and subconsciously grasped tightly onto Olin’s robes.

Something horribly bad had happened. Calamity had befallen Silvai.

“Olin, where’s Silvai?”

Had this happened because of the kiss?

“Doing something so stupid on your own.....!”

Olin harshly spat out after having stood in silence while holding me in a daze for a little while. He turned his vexed, and terribly pained, gaze at where Silvai had existed until just a moment ago and loudly clicked his tongue.

“What do you mean? Where did Silvai disappear to?”

The curious heat on my forehead had already subsided, and I understood that something much more serious had just happened.

Olin bit down on his lips as if he was trying to endure physical pain. He looked down at me. His vivid red eyes were fixed on top of my forehead. Pulled by his gaze, I reflexively pressed down my hand against my forehead.

I was shocked to feel something that I didn’t expect to be there.

“Huh? What is this?”

Something small and hard was stuck on my forehead. It was cold on the surface, but I could feel something similar to warmth coming from my fingertips.

—*No, it’s not stuck there, it came from inside of my head...?*

“You’re cannot possibly beat Fortune’s power when you don’t know any spells or skills with the sword. And so, Silvai granted you the power to rival the successor’s, granted to him by Fortune. He broke the covenant.”

“You mean the covenant of inviolability.....?”

“That’s not all. He infringed upon one of the commandments established by the gods as well. A god may only silently bestow blessings and love upon man. Unlike Fortune, you haven’t earned the right to cross the heavenly gate. Silvai wasn’t supposed to directly pour power into you based on his own decision.”

“Heavenly gate.....? So what happened to Silvai?”

“All who defile reason are judged. Silvai was stripped of his status as a god for a thousand years. Offenders are punished in accordance to their crimes.”

“Stripped.....!?”

I wasn’t confident that I understood everything that Olin had said. But I still sensed that the situation was grave. I looked desperately at the place where

Silvai had been and grasped Olin's robes tighter.

"So is Silvai locked up in some kind of prison.....? Or did something even worse happen to him?"

Olin shook his head and wouldn't tell me what happened to Silvai no matter how much I badgered him for an answer. Did that mean that Silvai was going through so much pain and humiliation that he wouldn't tell me?

"Oh, the other gods caught on to us."

Olin's face paled and he continued,

"we don't have time."

"Olin. When you say that we don't have time.....you said that from the begin....."

"Sorry. I don't think I'll have enough time to explain things properly. Now that all of this has happened, I'm afraid that the other gods will likely reject your existence."

I gulped and looked at Olin's stern profile as he looked out into the distance. He continued,

"Silvai's such a troublesome fellow. And here I'd thought that I'd be the one to go first. Did he think that it was a competition or something?"

Olin's visage softened as he gave a small wry smile. He pat me lightly on the back as if to calm me because I had lost my composure from anxiety and swiftly took out the shortest of the three swords that he wore at his waist.

I say that it was the shortest, but it was still plenty long enough from my perspective. The sword had a complicated pattern drawn on one portion of its black hilt. There were twin red jewels embedded on both the tip of the scabbard and the top of the hilt.

"Cut down the revenants with this sword, you hear me? This is a sword that's excellent for exorcisms. It can't cut through people, but it'll destroy anything else. Monsters included, of course. This sword is capable of opposing anything that's demonic in nature."

Olin thrust the sword in my hands as I looked back in panic and confusion and

then turned his gaze behind us.

“—Come, Eru.”

The space before my eyes suddenly wavered as he called out.

“Ah!?”

A white mist formed and swirled around. A large beast with steel-colored fur appeared at its center. It held something that I was familiar with in its mouth.

“My bag!!”

The beast narrowed his eyes at the noise and turned to Olin to lower his head as if he was showing off his obedience. Olin nodded and collected my bag from the beast’s mouth and offered it to me. Things that looked like travel necessities were fastened to the beast already, though I didn’t know who had prepared them.

“This is my favorite sacred beast. Get on him and go. I’ve also packed some things that you might need once you arrive.”

“By packed, you mean.....”

Why are you suddenly in such a hurry?

Olin knelt down in front of me as I hesitated in my inability to digest the situation.

Olin pursed his lips and looked up to the sky. I looked up with him. I saw a scattered clump of black spots in the white sky, which reminded me of snow. The black spots gradually grew larger and closer.

Are those shadows other gods?

“Silvai granted you power first. But I can help lessen your burden too.”

“It, it’s fine! You’ve already done enough.....!”

Olin, you might lose your status as a god too!

I tried to step back in a panic, but Olin was faster. He grabbed me with his long arms and looked at me with serious eyes.

“Never forget. Both Silvai and I have blessed you. That means that, even as a

human, you've become a part of both Silvai's and my households. May light and happiness be ever with our maiden."

After saying all of that with a dignified voice, Olin swiftly pressed his lips against the back of my hand. It was just like how a knight would kiss someone's hand to swear fealty to them. The back of my hand grew hot just like what had happened when Silvai had done it.

It was like a small flame had began to burn at that exact spot.

I looked down at my left hand at a loss for words. My forehead aside, the back of my left hand had no visible changes.

Olin looked up at me as I stood frozen and his cheeks loosened in embarrassment for a moment.

"Now then. It's no fun if I'm always behind Silvai on everything."

"Olin?"

Olin pulled me closer with great strength as I awkwardly looked back at him. By the time I had noticed, his red eyes, more beautiful than roses, were close enough to touch.

"Forgive me."

A sigh escaped with his words. I felt something soft covering my lips. ——*Is this.....a kiss?*

My mind went blank from the kiss that was so gentle that I felt like I would melt.

"It's too bad. If you'd said that you wanted to stay in heaven, I would have welcomed you as my wife."

I broke out of my trance at Olin's jesting.

".....!.....!!"

I don't believe this, I don't believe this! Silvai was one thing, but to think that Olin would do something inappropriate as well. I quivered as I opened and closed my mouth repeatedly. It was too much, I hadn't even given him my consent!

“I told you to forgive me.”

“.....For, forgive you!?”

I suddenly found myself floating in the air when I finally got my voice to work again.

No. Olin had picked me up with one arm.

—*He's carrying me like luggage!*

Olin jumped on the back of the beast named Eru while holding me. Immediately afterward, Eru promptly crossed over the handrail and leapt—to the illusionary town that looked a little like Sarumi way down below.

“Kyaah.....!!”

My hair fluttered and the sleeves of my robes flapped audibly. I felt the strange sensation of floating in my chest. It was hard to breathe. Intense vibrations rippled throughout my body the moment I closed my eyes. We had apparently landed safely.

I was too scared to open my eyes. The beast began to run across the earth like the wind.

I didn't know how long I had endured it, but I suddenly realized that the wind had stopped.

“Is this as far as I go?”

I heard Olin whisper. I opened my eyes in a panic to find that he had dismounted alone while leaving me on Eru's back. A thick and gloomy forest was all around us. A glimmering fog drifted by.

“Eru, take this child with you. Protect her. Love and obey Hibiki as you would me.”

“Olin, what are you talking.....”

Olin abruptly looked up as I raised my voice in protest.

—*A cage!*

A silver cage that looked just like the one that had caused Silvai to disappear had appeared. The cage of judgement that bound the gods. Olin didn't falter

even until the very end. He swiftly drew the swords at his waist and vigorously rent the earth.

The silver cage paused for a brief moment at the ferocity of Olin's swords, but it soon expanded into an elliptical shape anyway.

"Never forget. We are your protectors."

"Olin! Wait, I haven't.....!"

Eru circled around Olin with me still on his back in one fluid movement and howled.

Then, he forcefully jumped into the rent earth.

"Olin!"

I looked up at Olin as the darkness swallowed Eru and me up.

Olin cast a potent gaze back at me and smiled like a truly dignified king.

My consciousness faded immediately after his indomitable figure was captured in the cage and disappeared.

↑The name "Hibiki" is derived from the Japanese kanji that means "to echo; to resound; to reverberate"

Chapter 3: Knight of a Fallen Kingdom

Tepid darkness. The atmosphere clung to my body as if I was floating in water.

I suddenly found it hard to breathe, so I raised my head and slowly opened my eyes.

I heard a beastly coo fawning over me close by. I had apparently fallen unconscious on top of Eru, who had steel-colored fur. At first, I could only see the darkness, but my surroundings eventually became clearer.

The scene reflected before my eyes—was a ruined, lifeless world colored by an unsettling faint darkness. A fog, stagnated in a different way than the fog in heaven had been, hung over the area.

“.....Where are we?”

My foolish-sounding voice, free from any hint of caution, was swallowed by the faint darkness without leaving any echoes behind.

“Eru.....do you know where we are?”

I was so perturbed by the strangeness of the world before my eyes that I could not help but subconsciously ask the beast who could not talk. Eru looked back at me for a bit and twitched his lion-like nose, and I felt that he was troubled and did not know what to do with me even as I was riding on his back.

“Is this Evelier, by any chance?”

I dropped word after word into the darkness as I talked to myself. I couldn’t stand the anxiety if I didn’t.

Thank goodness that Eru was with me, even if he couldn’t speak. If I had been left behind in his ominous place all alone, I might have gone crazy from fear.

Eru growled quietly from time to time and fidgeted cautiously, likely because he was stimulated by the ominous air around us. He looked back multiple times and shook his slightly stiff fur as if he wanted to leave this place as soon as possible. I guessed that Eru was anxious too, after having been separated from his master, Olin.

Since I, the person accompanying him, was not only unreliable but was actually more of a burden, it was no wonder that he was scared.

Still, Eru seemed like he was an intelligent and loyal beast and did not try to move before I instructed him to. It was probably best to trust his bestial instincts and move away from here as fast as possible. After I made my decision, I lightly pat Eru on the back and signaled him onward. Eru obeyed, noticeably relieved.

I let Eru, who seemed to be able to sense the danger in the air, decide on where to go and devoted myself to observing my surroundings. There was probably no doubt that this was Evelier.

"Olin brought me down to the surface before he was caught by the silver cage....."

That would mean that, just like Silvai, Olin had infringed upon the covenant between the gods. He had refused to tell me what kind of terrifying punishment awaited them no matter how much I had begged. Was the penalty so cruel that he couldn't tell me?

My entire body stiffened under the weight of the responsibility that had been bestowed to me.

Two gods had sacrificed themselves in order to pour their power into me. I had to answer to their expectations, no matter what.

Eru and I were apparently in a thicket. A dull, greyish moon floated in the sky, but its light was so sorrowfully weak that I couldn't see into the depths of the woods.

The dusty stars that studded the night sky, too, only gave a weak shine as if they were on the verge of death. If I strained my eyes, I could just barely make out an outline of the area around me. That was how weak the light was.

"It's too quiet....."

The air was heavy. It was as if the sky, the trees, and the earth had gone silent from fear of the despair and death that spread across the world. There was no wind to carry over a cool breeze, and, apart from Eru's surreptitious footsteps echoing as we moved on, only silence prevailed.

"The world is rotting away,"

I subconsciously whispered. The world was so broken down that it would be difficult to save. The trunks of the trees scattered around us were thin and dry. The leaves that feebly hung limp from their branches had already withered.

A grave of trees. A stupid idea came into my head.

"I wonder if other places are desolated like this too?"

—*Could I really save this place?*

My feelings suddenly plummeted. I felt like this job was too much for me.

—*.....This might be impossible, Olin.*

To think that the world was this dark. No matter how hard I thought, I couldn't believe that I had the power to return this ruined world back to its true form.

Sensing that I had lost my nerve, Eru turned around and growled softly to cheer me up.

".....This isn't the time to be a coward."

I encouraged myself by taking repetitive deep breaths. If I threw the towel here, there would have been no point to Silvai and Olin breaking their covenant. I didn't want to do anything that would disappoint the two gods who had entrusted me with their wishes and had granted me power. If I was going to give up, I could do it when I truly had no more cards left to play.

"But, I at least wish I had a bit more detailed information about this world....."

My real feelings leaked out a little. In all honesty, I had basically zero knowledge about Evelier.

In any case, according to Olin had said, I just had to cut down the revenants with this sword.....but I didn't know how to wield the all-important sword in question. It was probably going to be different from preparing fish.

"Besides, will I be able to tell if something's a revenant just by looking at it?"

If I couldn't figure out where in Evelier I was right now, then I'd have no idea where I was supposed to go from here on out. My anxiety increased with the

mysteries I faced. Just as I was about to lose heart and bury my head in my hands, Eru went on guard and lowered his posture. He was preparing to dash. I grabbed on to Eru's mane in a panic.

"Eru?"

Eru didn't let out a single growl as he readied himself to move at any moment's notice. *What should I do; should I grab my sword and prepare to face danger?*

Still nervous, I ran my gaze down to the long sword that was fastened to the luggage behind me.

"Is someone there?"

There was no way there was. There were only supposed to be revenants left in this world.

Besides, what do revenants even look like to begin with?Like slimes?

Just as I had tilted my head to the side, unable to imagine what revenants looked like.

I abruptly sat up straighter and looked all around me. *There's something here!*

A black shadow squirmed next to the skinny tree that was to the left and in front of me.

"Eru."

The intelligent beast sprinted vigorously as if he had understood when I quietly called out his name. I desperately grabbed on to Eru's mane so that I wouldn't get thrown to the ground. I would be hit by the wind resistance if I sat up straight. I realized this along the way and pushed my upper body forward. I somehow still managed to kept my head up so that I could check on our surroundings.

I heard the sound of multiple footsteps kicking away the dried wild grass. We were being chased.

When I looked back, I saw pronounced shadows crossing over to us from between the scattered trees.

I grew even more nervous as my heart began to beat furiously. Round golden lights floated in the darkness. They blinked like fireflies. They weren't revenants. They were probably wild dogs or wolves or something like that.

—*We're being attacked.*

The black shadows had closed in the distance between us and were in line with Eru by the time that I clearly discerned this.

Eru ran even faster. I burned the image of the black shadows firmly in my eyes when we dodged them as they drew closer, searching for an opening to jump us. They weren't regular wild dogs.

They were creatures with limbs that I had never seen before. They were quadruped monsters with hideous faces at the end of their long necks. They had mouths that were cut open all the way to their long, rabbit-like ears. They looked like they were sneering at us.

They cried jarring, metallic threats as they chased after Eru.

Eru was at the absolute disadvantage since he had to carry me, extra baggage, with him. All of the monsters were starved. I felt their intense drive prickling on my skin as they refused to lose their prey.....us.

"What do we do.....?!"

—*I didn't know that it would be this dangerous!*

"Eru, run!"

I felt unwanted sweat on my palms, forehead, and down my back. The monsters' breathing was ragged. We had no other choice but to turn our backs and flee. It would be the end of the road if they caught up to us. This wasn't some kind of game where I could just reload and try again.

Eru lived up to his title as Olin's beast and knew precisely what he had to do even in a tense situation like this. We were going so fast that my hair was flowing horizontal in one clump, but unlike a horse, he wasn't swaying in the slightest.

He ran as if we were literally sliding across the ground. There was no hesitation in his footsteps when he kicked against the earth as he could

apparently see well in the dark. He jumped left and right, changing directions constantly while trying to throw off the monsters behind us. The monsters could evidently see in the dark as well, but they apparently weren't as intelligent as Eru was. Eru toyed with them marvelously by changing course in irregular directions. We grew farther away from the monsters thanks to his efforts. I looked back multiple times to peek at the monsters running behind us.

"Good job, Eru!"

I called out to Eru before I knew it. Eru didn't slow down even though we had put enough distance between us and the monsters that I didn't think they'd chase after us anymore.

It was when we arrived at a clearing in the thicket that I felt a presence that was different from that of the monsters. Even I found it strange that I could perceive it.

It might have been the power that Olin and Silvai blessed me with at work.

"Wait."

Eru was obviously hesitant when I told him to stop. Considering that he shook his mane and continued running, he probably thought that it was best to keep putting more distance between us and the monsters.

But still.....there, just now, I most definitely heard a beast's death cry from somewhere else.

"Eru, did you hear that voice just now?"

Eru shook his head and growled. His urgent cry seemed to be saying, *we don't have time to care about that!*

"—Go to where the voice came from."

Eru balked quite a bit at my unreasonable order. Still, he gave up and turned around once he realized that I was stubbornly refusing to back down.

He seemed somewhat desperate, or maybe he was mad at me.....no, he was probably disappointed in me. He was running in a somewhat rough manner that was clearly different from before.

He probably thought that going back when we had finally managed to safely

get away from the swarm of monsters was suicidal, and it made all of the effort that Eru had put to run this far to waste.

But if, just maybe if, my instincts were right.

Indeed, I had heard the monsters' unnatural death cries before.

That's what I decided to bet on.

"It smells like blood."

The thick scent of blood smelled like rusted iron. Eru, whom I was riding on, probably noticed it too.

Eru continued to run in a straight line through the stifling faint darkness.

"Wait, Eru, over there."

A beast's fierce cry, fierce enough to make the trees shake, echoed from in front of us. It was close.

Eru didn't stop moving as he followed my instructions, but he did let out a small, bitter growl. He was probably complaining about how we were purposefully going back into danger.

"Oh! Over there!"

The place where I pointed Eru to veered sharply off to the right from where we had been earlier.

There were a few more trees that laid their roots in the ground here. Eru deftly slipped through the trees and dashed to where the noise was coming from.

Before long, we saw the black figure of a beast that towered like a huge rock in the pale darkness. The beast howled violently enough to make the atmosphere tremble and attacked something else. Eru slowed down and crept closer to the giant beast that continued to roar.

I squinted and observed the other shadow as it held back the ferocious beast.

—*It's a person!*

I know that person. I subconsciously made a fist.

It was the man whom I had met once before in the forest. He was fighting the violent howling beast.

His large sword drew an arc underneath the feeble light of the dull moon. Its cutting edge was unsteady, as if to indicate the waning stamina of its wielder.

At this rate, the beast would push it aside and it would fall to the ground.

The gigantic monster that was attacking the man had extremities that didn't exist in my world. Its face looked like a bear's and its arms and legs were long like a spider's. The way it lowered itself to the ground, as if to gather up strength, and sprang up to attack was eerie. Its movements weren't particularly clever, but its arms whipped through the air as it swung them in an attempt to defeat the man and just one swing was strong enough to cut down the trees in its path.

The man, who had been fending off the beast's persistent attacks with his sword, finally became unable to beat it back and staggered painfully. He fell to the ground on his knee.

Upon closer inspection, the beast was wounded and the man looked dreadfully tired. Numerous beast corpses littered the ground around them. Had he defeated them all on his own?

"Eru, let's help him."

Eru lowered his body to the ground as if he was about to pounce on his prey as I rode on his back.

The ferocious beast re-oriented itself and brought up its long arm with a ragged breath. The man was unable to brace himself properly for its visually simple attack.

"Go!"

Eru leapt the moment I shouted. He landed forcefully in between the beast and the man.

Both parties were surprised by the sudden intrusion and stopped moving in such perfect sync that it was like they had arranged it in advance.

The man's golden eyes that looked like they had sealed the moonlight within them were opened wide in shock.

"Get on!"

The man abruptly got up and moved as if on reflex.

The beast grasped the situation the moment that the man jumped on behind me and closed in on us in a panic.

Eru nimbly moved away and circled around the monster as it brandished its long and tough arm at us. The man, seated behind me, failed to react in time to Eru's sudden movements and nearly fell off.

"Hold on!"

Eru changed directions before the irritated beast could and vigorously ran forward. But then, he suddenly stopped and warily braced himself.

—*The beasts from before caught up to us!*

Appearing between the trees before us was the swarm of monsters with dull gold eyes. Behind us was the wounded ferocious beast. Eru turned around without hesitation and ran back to where the gigantic beast was waiting for us, but I didn't know why.

The monsters that had finally caught up to us drew closer to where Eru was —in other words, to where the giant beast was waiting—as if they were being drawn in.

"You're gonna make them fight each other!"

I was impressed once I realized what Eru had meant to do. *Eru, you're amazing!*

Apparently, the monsters had decided that it was a better idea to go after the wounded beast, which was in a similar condition as them, than it was to chase after the smart and quick Eru. Likewise, the gigantic beast reacted more strongly to the monsters that were brimming with the intent to kill than it did to us, especially when we had already proved that we were hard to bring down.

Eru didn't slow down in the slightest even though he carried both the man and me on his back and kept sprinting farther away from the monsters.

The hideous howls of their fight reverberated after us.

Eru continued to run in silence. He kept running until we could no longer hear the monsters' howls and I could no longer see the thicket.

Eru finally stopped running when we were deep inside a basin far away from the thicket.

We stopped right next to an old tree that had lost all of its leaves. Its branches were spread out nicely, making it possible to hide ourselves from the monsters' prying eyes if we sat on its roots.

I jumped off from Eru's back thinking that it was the perfect place to rest.

"Thank you, Eru. Good work."

I caressed Eru's face as if I was trying to console him. I was worried that he was still mad at me, but Eru narrowed his eyes and purred, and then he nuzzled his lion-like nose against my shoulder.

I think he understood that I made us go back to save the man. It looked like I had regained some of his trust.

"You should come down too,"

I said to the hesitant man as I pat Eru's ears.

He obediently climbed down to the ground with his moon-colored eyes glued on me.

"Wanna sit?"

I beckoned to the upright man after I unfastened the luggage from Eru and sat down on the roots of the old tree. Eru laid down next to me as if it was the natural thing to do.

It was like he was guarding me. Truth be told, Eru looked just as ferocious as the monsters, but I strangely found him cute now that he'd cozied up to me.

"Over here."

I pat at the dried earth next to me. The man approached me in a daze and sat down with his sword still in his hand. *Yeah, he really is pretty big.* Putting Olin

aside, he was probably had the best body out of all of the people I'd ever known. But he was now covered in more wounds than he had been when we first met.

"Let's get you patched up."

I thought that he couldn't understand what I was saying, so I reached out for my bag without waiting for him to reply.

"—Who are you?"

"Huh?"

I thought that Eru had spoken for a moment.

But that wasn't possible. My hand stopped moving as I turned to look at the man's face.

—*Why can I understand what you're saying?*

But I couldn't before!

He blinked, similarly baffled.

I remembered how Olin had kissed me in the middle of my confusion at this inexplicable situation. Was I suddenly able to understand what he was saying because of that kiss?

The man stared at me blankly as I suspiciously went pale and then bright red.

"Uh, umm, can you really understand what I'm saying?"

The man nodded slowly as his bewildered gaze wavered.

"Who are you?"

he asked again in a gentle low voice. I was strangely impressed about how nice his voice was.

"Erm, we've met once before?"

Did he remember?

"Yeah——in the Forest of Warz."

Warz? I'd never heard of it before, but I ignored it for now.

I composed myself and looked back at him.

"Are you.....the last person of this country?"

He abruptly straightened up as if he'd been shot at when I asked.

Deep solitude exuded from his eyes. The flames of craving lit them from within. The torturous flames of deprivation burned so brightly that I was afraid that they would hurt him. I felt like the story of the suffering he had endured all alone were written in his eyes.

I was rendered speechless. It was the first time I'd ever seen such crazed eyes.

".....You..."

he whispered hoarsely. Marked anguish was visible on his mien as he worried if I was an illusion, but desperately wanted to believe otherwise.

—*He really was alone all this time.*

I crawled closer to him as he furrowed his brows in pain.

"It's okay."

He stiffened up cautiously. I wanted him to relax, so I touched his large hand that was still tightly gripping his sword. His shoulders jerked. He wasn't calming down at all.

"I'm alive. And I'm right here."

I was lost at what I could say to get him to trust me. He had probably devoted himself to fighting monsters, piling up one cruel experience after another, while watching the revenants, who had once been human, in his loneliness. It was my turn to take up that role now.

I silenced the alarm bells in my heart and smiled. I think I might have stiffened up a bit.

"I'm not an illusion. I'm human, just like you."

The look in his eyes changed with what was almost an audible click. An intense emotion welled up from within him—like a dried fountain that had been turned on once more. His face twisted and he let out a small groan. He trembled slightly once and turned away as if he was ashamed of himself.

"It's okay; it hurt.....to be alone all this time, right?"

I found it troubling that I was about to cry too for some reason. I felt a painfully profound sorrow from him.

I felt like I'd fall deep into solitude just by brushing upon it. I squeezed the man's hand.

His large and warm hand, which was covered in wounds and moist with blood.

The man slowly raised his head. His face was filled with fear and agony. Transparent drops of liquid suddenly covered his moon-colored eyes. Tear after tear flowed down his tanned skin. He groaned once again while biting his lip.

I got up to my knees in a panic and placed a hand on his moistened cheek.

"Don't cry. Please, don't cry."

I felt like my heart would get crushed just by watching him cry while clenching his teeth.

The man let of his sword, which he had been tightly holding on to, and held me as if he was clinging to me. His embrace was so strong that I almost couldn't breathe. His loneliness slowly permeated into me. But, I was sure that he was hurting more.

"Oh, um..."

He was warm enough that I was worried he might have a fever. I ended up clinging to his hard chest, and I found myself strangely flustered despite the situation.



It was like someone who was drowning was clinging onto me. The man continued to weep silently. He pressed his cheek against my head and caressed

my shoulders and back over and over again as if he was making sure of what he was feeling.*I understand why you're doing it, I really do, but if you keep touching me like that...!*

But I couldn't do something as cold as pushing away someone who was crying. I endured it despite my panic and let him do as he wanted. Eventually, I lost the ability to tell if it was my heart that was beating so furiously or if it was the man who was trembling. It was all so crazy that I felt like my breathing would grow ragged any minute now.

It was Eru who saved me when I began to grow dizzy.

The man noticed Eru clawing at the earth and growling in displeasure and abruptly looked up.

"Uh, umm..."

I said quietly with my eyes still closed. I really wasn't in the state of mind to look up at him.

"Oh, um.....I'm sorry."

The man returned to his senses and released me in a hurry. I felt a little lonely as his warmth gently disappeared.

"Huh? Eru!?"

I was pulled backward all of a sudden. When I turned around, I saw that Eru had bitten onto my sleeve and was frantically pulling me back closer to him.

"What's wrong?"

Eru only released my sleeve after he had dragged me a decent distance away from the man.

I guess that my loyal bodyguard didn't like the man very much. After glaring at him in obvious intimidation he nuzzled against my knee like he wanted to be spoiled. *Yeah, I mean it's cute, but still.....*

"Oh, right. Let me treat your wounds."

I wanted to give Eru, who had played the star role in getting us away from the monsters, some water too.

The man casually wiped away his tears with his fingertips and smiled a faint wry smile. Eru kept his eyes glued on him.

"Eru, stop, don't threaten him like that."

Eru sourly looked away in a huff when I cautioned him. *Yeah.....*

I checked through the contents of my bag although I was still worried about Eru. Olin had said that he had prepared everything I'd need, so I was curious about what was inside.

"Oh, thank goodness."

My water bottle had been refilled. I opened the lid, placed my hand in front of Eru, and slowly poured water into it. Eru peeked up at me once and licked the water up.

He looked like he'd had enough after just a few mouthfuls. Did he not need that much water to begin with? Or maybe he was just holding back?

I gave up trying to get Eru to drink more water after hesitation for a little while and offered my water bottle to the man. I laughed as he tilted his head to the side in confusion and urged him to drink. He politely gave me his thanks and accepted it. I checked through the rest of the luggage while he drank. Olin had prepared more things apart from what was in my bag. Let's see, a change of clothes? Or something that looked like it, at least. I had to admire Olin's level of preparation after seeing that there were clothes that were too big for me too for some reason. Had Olin predicted that this would happen?

Otherwise, there was also a sack of bread, a small package, and a leather waterskin. To be honest, most of it was stuff I didn't know how to use. Perhaps the man would know if I asked him?

I wondered if the leaf-like package had medicine inside of it. It smelled a bit like traditional Chinese herbal medicine.

"I wonder if this'll work for external wounds....., take this."

I gave the man a change of clothes, something that looked like a towel, and the package too for good measure.

".....You don't mind?"

He looked down at the things I handed him before modestly looking back up again.

“I don’t. Besides, I don’t really know how to use it.”

He hesitantly opened the small package. Then, he immediately looked back at me in surprise.

“Isn’t this Furon powder?”

Yeah, I have no idea.

“It’s a valuable herb that’s not easy to get ahold of.”

Oh, so I was right —it was medicine.

“Well, use it.”

He looked back at me with a complicated expression that betrayed his amazement at my light-hearted reply.

“Just who are.....no, may I please inquire as to who you are?”

he asked, correcting both his facial expression and his tone of voice.

I decided to treat his wounds first before answering his question.

Evidently, you used the powdered herb called Furon powder by mixing it with water. We didn’t have a suitable container to mix the medicine in, so he used a sturdy-looking leaf that we found instead.

After mixing a pinch of the dark green powder with water on top of the leaf, it turned into something with the viscosity of potato starch and increased in volume. The medicine became all the more pungent, perhaps because it had absorbed the water, causing me to subconsciously scrunch up my face.

It would stop the bleeding if you applied enough of the paste on your wounds. The man taught me how efficacious the medicine was and that it would even cure deeper wounds in only a few days.

I applied the medicine on him despite that he had tried to hold back at first and wrapped cloth around his wounds in the lieu of bandages.

“You have so many scars.....”

I gasped. He was covered in several large scars that patterned his sturdy body like a clumsily embroidered handkerchief. Old scars and new ones. Both his body and his soul were covered in countless inerasable scars. My mood naturally dropped as the thought occurred to me.

“.....I hope these robes fit you.”

I had him change clothes after I finished treating his wounds. The clothes that he had been wearing were so worn that I didn’t know what to do with them and smelled horrible because they had been drenched in blood.

The man looked calmer to a degree, as if he was feeling refreshed, after changing. And, though I hadn’t put it to words, I was honestly starting to feel hungry. When was the last time I had eaten? I couldn’t get a sense for the passage of time.

We fried the bread-like food that was hard and light in color from Olin over the fire. It puffed up like mochi and increased in volume.

It was a little lacking to only eat that, so we also had something that looked like raisins on the side.

.....Actually, I disliked raisins and dried persimmons. Which was why I only had one and gave the rest of my share to Eru, while I only ate the bread. Eru seemed to like it.

We finished our simple meal and shared a short moment of peace around the fire.

The man, who was sitting a little away from me, looked at me with a serious face that told me that he had a mountain of questions he wanted to ask. I, too, had a lot of things that I had to learn about this world from him.

But, for some reason, I felt more awkward than I had when we had first met.

It was because he was being weirdly formal.

“You know, I’d be happier if you acted normally around me like you did before.....”

I should be the one who was polite toward him instead. He was older than me no matter how I looked at it. *I wonder how old he is?* He had a mature air about

him, but he looked quite young when he smiled.

“May I ask you for your name?”

The man asked with inquisitive eyes as he upheld his courteous attitude.

“It’s Hibiki. Hibiki Mishima.”

He fell silent with a strange look on his face. I’m sure my name sounded unusual to someone from this world.

“Er, so what’s your name?”

“My name is Louie Marvell.”

It looked like he was on his guard again. It was a little depressing.

“Excuse me, but you have quite the unusual name..... Where do you hail from?”

“I’m not telling you.”

The man.....Louie was rendered speechless when I answered while purposefully looking away. I continued,

“I’m not gonna talk until you start acting and talking normally.”

Sorry, but I wouldn’t be able to handle it psychologically if the stiff formalities continued.

—I won’t be able to be open with you that way, Louie.

The thought whispered itself in my heart.

“But.....are you not a princess of high social standing?”

Louie looked around hesitantly and drew in a leg closer to himself.

“A princess!?”

I was completely taken aback by his unexpected image of me. Just how had he come to *that* conclusion?

I wondered if he simply had extremely poor eyesight before it dawned on me.

“.....Is it because of my clothes?”

I looked down at myself in a hurry. The clothes that I had been changed into

in heaven were certainly eye-catchingly gorgeous. But there was a simple reason as for why I hadn't notice it until now.

The garments that Olin and Silvai had worn were much more flamboyant. And they had also been wearing so many ornamentations that you could hear it when they walked.

Now that I had taken another look at myself, I realized that my clothes might look a little too extravagant for a world on the brink of destruction like Evelier.

I had a delicate, sand-colored ornament on my ear and I was even wearing a pendant that was strung together with little jewels.

I also had a bracelet with a complex pattern to it. Its fretwork design, too, was inlaid with jewels. Even I, with my untrained eyes, could tell that it was expensive. I finally began to panic. Just how much was all of this worth?

My actual clothes consisted of a tunic made of smooth fabric. It was the type of tunic that was held together by an obi sash, like a Japanese kimono. Its long sleeves didn't bother me because they were comfortably light.

The men's clothes that I had given Louie weren't that different from mine. The only real difference was that his didn't have the sleeves.

"Do I look like a princess to you? That's one scary misunderstanding."

Did this world really have princesses that wore dresses and princes and nobility?

"However, I cannot say that you look like the average village girl.....well..."

Louie grew flustered because I had glared at him a little. I mean, he was still talking all formally and everything.

"I don't have any social standing, you know."

"You don't.....?"

"I'm not a princess or a village girl; I'm just a normal girl."

Louie looked a little confused by my flat refusal.

"Do you mean to say that you are a commoner? However, is your appearance not closer to that of royalty?"

I shut my mouth and kept my silence. Louie finally let out a soft sigh after I outlasted him in our short-lived staring contest. This time, he asked, “can you explain what you meant?”

Yep, much better.

I flashed him a grin and told him the story that I had made up hurriedly on the spot. I couldn’t just tell him everything as it was. Besides, if I told him that I came from a far-off land called Japan from another dimension and that I was here in this world because I’d met two literal gods, he’d probably think that there was something wrong with me.

I felt a little guilty about lying, but I turned a blind to it because there wasn’t anything else I could do about it.

I told him that I was from a really, really far away country that was closed off to the rest of the world. I couldn’t tell him what country it was because of certain reasons ——actually, I just couldn’t think up of a name—— and I was here to investigate how the world had begun to break down after a natural disaster had occurred on the orders of some important noble. I used to travel with an attendant, but I had unfortunately been separated from them and was currently in a pickle because of it.

—Argh, I’m so bad at lying!

Louie looked obviously suspicious. I guess it was a stretch to think he’d buy such an inconsistent story to begin with.

“And so, there’s no real distinction between social ranks in my country. It wouldn’t be an exaggeration to say that they don’t exist.”

“There are no social ranks?”

Louie said in amazement as he looked increasingly more suspicious.

“But I’m the only one talking here. I’d like you to tell me about your situation too.”

I tried adding on a bit about how my objective was to obtain intelligence about the world.

Louie tried to hide his confusion as he failed to mentally organize what I had

told him, or rather, as he looked like he wasn't satisfied by the sloppy story I had told him. Even still, he reluctantly began talking when I complained to him with my eyes. Louie was apparently a knight! What?

Basically, this world was like a foreign country that was still in the middle ages.....no, it was more fantasy-like than that. Not only were their knights and nobles, but there were also court sorcerers and mages.

—*W, well, I've met gods before. I shouldn't be surprised my mere mages!*

Louie didn't talk much about himself, perhaps because he was being wary of me. While it made me feel a little lonely at first, I knew that I was reaping the seeds I had sown by lying to him.

In return, he carefully explained what condition the world was in and how it got there.

He said that in the winter of the year 6701 on the Holy calendar.....just about three years ago, the dark banquet heralded the beginning of calamity.

"At first, everyone believed that the epidemic, which comes and goes every few years, had come a little early. Every country was able to predict how the epidemic would spread and implemented a plan of action to deal with it. That was why no one took the issue too seriously."

Louie subconsciously brushed away a strand of hair that was stuck to his cheek and looked into the distance. He continued,

"but, the people who had been complaining about light fatigue suddenly lost their senses and grew violent. Then, even their bodies began to transform. The strange disease that had infected them moved from family to family, town to town in the blink of an eye."

"How long did it take.....?"

"It didn't even take two months. It was too late by the time that the royalty realized the situation was so grave that they needed to take immediate action. There was nothing that could be done as people turned into revenants one after another and entire towns fell. The 'End' began and spread with our kingdom, once called the <Eyes of the Majesty>.....New Queen Gallè, at its center."

"What about other countries?"

Louie let out a lonely, gentle sigh when I had hesitantly asked him my question.

"There were many people who, fearing this threat, planned to escape the kingdom, but even the countries that they escaped to soon began to fall into ruin. As proof that this wasn't simply some strange new disease, several prominent sorcerers and mages failed to bring back the peace even after utilizing their rare talents. To think that I'd see the closing chapters of humanity's history with my own eyes. Our lament never reached the gods. We weren't granted even the smallest miracle....."

Louie's shoulders began to quiver slightly. He continued,

"the vivid colors of the seasons were lost and the weather ran wild. Only three years. That's all it took for the world's time to stop. It's like a nightmare —I still can't believe that this happened."

I was rendered speechless by his brutal story. Had Fortune really created this extreme fate just because of his hatred and despair? Something about it bothered me a little.

I feel like this isn't the kind of thing anybody can carry through just because of their personal feelings—.

"Is your country alright?"

"Huh.....? Yeah, I think there was some pretty bad water damage."

I replied a beat late because I had been deep in thought. If I recall correctly, Silvai said that this world and my world were two sides of the same coin. That, if Evelier was facing a drought, the water veins in my world would get disrupted and a calamity of water would befall it.

"Hey, Louie. Do you have a map? I'd like to see a map of the world if that's possible."

"A map of the world?"

The traces of distress vanished from Louie's face and was replaced by blank puzzlement. *Did I ask something weird?* But I wouldn't know where I was

supposed to go if I didn't have a map to see where I was. Louie continued,

"there are maps of the kingdom, of course, but I've never heard of a map of the world."

It was my turn to be surprised by his answer. So then, did the inhabitants of Evelier not know what shape their world was, or how far the continent stretched?

For starters.....is this planet even spherical like earth is?

"Did New Queen Gallè not interact with other countries by any chance?"

"No, we did trade with others. Still, why do you need a map?"

"I have to go to all sorts of countries."

My goal was to return the world to its senses, in addition to turning back the people who had been turned into revenants. I continued,

"but I wanna start with this one for now. So, there *are* maps of the kingdom, right.....? Are there maps with all of the towns and villages recorded in detail?"

He looked at me as if I had asked a bizarre question.

"Well.....how much detail are you looking for?"

"One that has compass directions on it, has a scale for distance measurements, and routes.....large roads that people travel on. It'd also be nice if it showed how large each town was. Even better if there are residential maps too."

It'd be easy to get my hands on a map like that if I was in Japan. But, after hearing what Louie had to say, things that were a given in Japan didn't necessarily seem to be considered common sense here.

At this rate, I probably shouldn't expect to be able to get my hands on a family registry.

"I'm sorry, but I've never seen a map that detailed before."

"But there *are* maps, right? Then, do you know where I'd be able to get my hands on one?"

There didn't seem to be much of a point in obtaining a map at this point, but I

at least wanted to check and see how detailed they were.

"You'd probably be able to obtain one if you went to a town."

"Where's the closest town from here?"

"Let me see..... There should probably be a village about a hundred odes southwest from here."

I was lost because I didn't know what an ode was.

"Erm, how long would it take to walk there?"

--You would require at least two full days. No.....for a lady, you might need three."

I calculated the distance in my head. Two days on foot. I could probably get there in a day if Eru let me ride him.

"Princess.....no, Hibiki."

Louie reluctantly pronounced my name when I glared at him. He continued,

"do you plan on going to the village?"

"Yeah."

"By yourself?"

I instinctively drew back under his strangely forceful gaze. Oh, his expression just now, it reminds me a lot of Uncle Miharu. Which means.....that this was the bitter look he makes before giving a lecture. Louie continued,

"do you really plan on going?"

"Erm.....I'm maybe thinking of going.....as long as it's possible."

Louie looked straight at me with a gaze as sharp as a knife when I tried to dodge the question.

".....I, I'm scared?"

"Of course you are. Not only will there be monsters, but Reims will be lying in wait in the village as well."

Judging from the flow of the conversation, I gathered that 'Reim' must be the proper name for the revenants.

Though, I'd meant that *Louie* was scaring me just now.

"I'll tell you everything you wish to know about this kingdom, if that's why you're going."

"I'd be happy if you did, but there'd be no point unless I go in person."

"Why is that?"

"They say that seeing is believing, right?"

"Pardon?"

Did this kingdom not use idioms? Louie continued,

"you.....don't seem to understand how dangerous it would be to go to the village."

Of course I don't understand. I was born in a peaceful Japan, I grumbled to myself as I let my eyes wander elsewhere.

"Alright, I'll do my best not to go anywhere dangerous."

I couldn't honestly promise him anything. But I felt like Louie's strict eyes would remain on me until I at least said that much.

"—You..."

I froze in shock at the extreme grief in Louie's voice. He continued,

"...don't understand anything."

Louie smiled a bitter smile. His moon-colored eyes were dark, as if they had swallowed up the darkness whole.

"Please answer me honestly. Are you planning to go to the village?"

I couldn't decide on whether I should lie or not. I'd undoubtably hurt him if I did. But he'd probably stop me from going if I told him the truth.

"You know that I am the last survivor of this kingdom. And even still, are you saying that you want to go somewhere so dangerous you might not come back alive?"

I felt like I'd been slapped across the cheek. *Right, he's the only person in New Queen Gallè.*

—*If I disappeared, would Louie be alone again?*

But, was it okay for me to drag Louie around with me? I recalled what Olin had said. Normal blades would not work on Reims. Even if they did work somehow, it would destroy their souls as well. —*I wonder what that means.*

“Listen, Reims attack people. If they get you, you’ll be turned into a Reim as well. And, most spells and blades have no effect against them.”

Oh, I think I’ve kinda figured out Louie’s personality. He’s generally pretty open-minded and kind, but when push comes to shove, he’s stubborn enough to put you at your wit’s end. He was the same personality type as Uncle Miharu. I was the opposite, so while I looked serious at first, I was actually fairly irresponsible and just went along with the flow, plus I changed my mind pretty easily.

“Louie!”

The fire crackled. The red flames that fluttered in the darkness twisted around my shadow on the ground.

I turned my gaze to Louie’s face, which reflected back the radiance of the flames. The shadows on the bridge of his nose and brow looked so dignified that I thought I could get lost in them. Even his eyes had soaked in the colors of the flames and were a deep red as they looked back at me. He really did have beautiful eyes.

“I have to go visit a lot of towns and countries no matter what.”

“Why?”

“Because of circumstances.”

I grew irritated at my own limited vocabulary. At this rate, anyone, and not just Louie, would be less than satisfied with what I said.

Louie smiled cynically as I desperately wracked my brains.

“Am I truly that untrustworthy?”

“.....That’s not it.”

“You haven’t offered me a single word of truth since before. And yet, there is

no spite in what you are saying. Is it forbidden for me to ask of your circumstances?"

I was really troubled. It was actually the other way around, and I was sure that Louie would stop trusting me if I *did* tell him the truth.

An awkward silence continued between us for a short while.

Louie finally looked away and sighed deeply when Eru let out a soft yawn.

"I seem to have troubled you. Please forget that I asked."

Yeah, I've definitely hurt him. I could feel my guilt piling up slowly and steadily.

"Hey, Louie. Is there anywhere that's safe in this kingdom?"

Louie looked suspicious. I continued,

"is there a place where you could stay safe?"

Olin had been overjoyed that I had saved Louie in the interworld. That was why I wanted to protect him, the last survivor of this kingdom, no matter what. Other than wanting to do this because of my sense of duty, I also wanted to do this because I wanted to atone for the fact that I had been about to abandon him in the forest. To be honest, I didn't have any right to receive thanks from Olin and Silvai.

"You can't die. That's why I want you to go somewhere that's as safe as possible."

The ends of Louie's lips twisted as he laughed. It was as if he was saying that there was no way that such a safe place even existed.

"And what am I supposed to do living all alone?"

"Louie, you shouldn't say things like that."

"And what about you? What about you, who's telling me not to die? Aren't you planning to dive right into danger?"

"Well, I have to because of certain circumstances."

Argh, geez, we're going in circles. I hadn't known that I was this bad with words. It was something I had learned about myself after interacting with

someone else.

"I won't die, so you have to stay alive too, Louie!"

Louie lowered his gaze. After a bit of hesitation, I readjusted to sit down next to him and looked up at his sorrowful profile. I started again,

"it'll be okay. It might take some time, but I'm sure you'll be able to meet other people too. And the kingdom will gradually be restored little by little."

I gently reached out and took Louie's hand.

Louie stirred and helplessly grabbed back the fingers of my hand that covered his own weakly.

"Are you—"

He captured me with his terribly anxious and pained moon-colored eyes.

"—a god?"

"Eh?"

My breath caught. It wasn't every day that you were seriously asked if you were a god.

Suddenly exhausted, I denied it right away for both my sake and Louie's.

"Why did you think I was a god? There's no way I'd be one."

My appearance was pretty normal both subjectively and objectively speaking. My clothes just happened to be a bit showy, but I didn't look divine like Olin and Silvai.

"However..."

Louie's eyes wandered hesitantly to my forehead.

Oh.....I forgot about that, now that I think about it.

I was a little disturbed by the awe mixed into Louie's face and timidly put my hands to my forehead.

The hard, round thing right at the center of my forehead. It felt like a stone had been embedded in my head or something.

Right, my forehead suddenly got hot when Silvai kissed me.

“.....Can I ask you something?”

“—What is it?”

“Is there something on my forehead?”

An awkward silence held between us for almost a full minute.

“Do you truly not know, even when it has to do with your own body?”

Louie looked obviously doubtful as he spoke.

“So there really is something?It’s not creepy, is it?”

.....Silvai, I believe in you, I really do! But I’m a girl who’s old enough to worry about these things, okay? I get anxious at the thought of having something attached to me that’s so bad that people can’t look at it.

“Heavens no!”

Louie waved his hands around in exaggerated motions. His hastiness seemed to imply that I had said something that I would get cursed by the gods for. He continued,

“that’s a divine stone, is it not? It’s not a magic stone, at the very least.”

A divine stone? The word changed into the homonym that meant ‘relatives’ inside of my head.¹

“What is that.....?”

“My apologies, but I cannot provide you with much of an explanation as I myself am not a mage. However, I have heard that mages who are well-versed in spellcraft sometimes form a divine stone, a crystallization of power, on their bodies. Still.....to have one appear on your forehead...”

Now that I thought about it, Louie’s guess probably wasn’t entirely off the mark. After all, this stone had appeared after I received a blessing from a god.

“But I, well.....I’m really not a god.”

Louie looked like he didn’t know if he should honestly agree to what I had said or not. He turned his bewildered gaze to Eru.

Eru vigilantly glared back at Louie, who was still unable to reach a decision.

Eru's attitude felt like he was putting on airs and saying, "you got a problem?"

"Then, just who in the world are you?"

Louie asked, terribly nervous.

I pondered about how I should answer his question, but in the end, I gave up because I couldn't come up with an answer.

"Louie, you can take anything you want from my luggage. Anything that you think you'll need to survive."

"What I want isn't some kind of *thing*!"

Louie denied my offer in agitation. It looked like he was desperately trying to seal away his rising emotions with reason.

I couldn't tell him the truth. But I was at a loss because I couldn't come up with a lie to convince him with either.

"I can't explain things to you not matter what because of my circumstances. But I swear that I'll absolutely never hurt you. I want you to trust me on that, if nothing else."

Louie suddenly got up. He turned my back to be as I was taken by surprise and began to walk away with clumsy steps.

"Where are you going?"

I followed after him in a panic and grabbed on to his arm.

Eru slowly followed behind us as well, but he stayed on stand-by a few steps away from us.

"—They are cruel."

Louie stopped, but he refused to turn around no matter how much I urged him. His entire body was tensed up, as if it was a testament to the strong feelings of rejection he was giving off. He continued,

"the things you say are so terribly cruel."

His hardened voice reverberated in blame as he spat out his words. I couldn't say anything in return.

"You saved my life not once, but twice. The first was in the forest of Warz. I was prepared to die at that time. I'd thought—that I'd rather be killed by beasts, that it was better than having my soul devoured by Reims. After losing my friend who was my only comrade and my only hope, I no longer had anything to protect or any attachments left in this world."

I was taken aback. His only comrade. Was that the person who Fortune's successor had left to die?

"Louie..."

"I thought that this must be what madness was like. If I was to die anyway, then I wanted to die in blood. I wanted to die as a human. That was my only desire, and then, right before me—you appeared."

Louie's back trembled slightly. He wasn't actually shedding any tears, but I felt like he was crying in his heart. He continued,

"I couldn't believe it. I decided to believe that you were just a dream. A mere illusion born from my twisted wishes. I thought that it was a rather sensible dream too, despite myself. Because what I wanted more than anything was the existence of someone other than myself."

Come to think of it.....Louie had looked at me so desperately when we'd first met. His gaze had been so serious and earnest that it had surprised me. It was as if he had forgotten even how to blink.

"And then, you suddenly vanished. I forced myself to believe that you were ultimately just a convenient dream conjured by my madness. And yet..."

His quivering breaths faded into the tepid darkness.

Louie's silhouette was fuzzy and vanished slightly into the darkness because we were away from the fire. I harbored the illusion that visible sorrow lingered around his figure.

"...You appeared before more like this again. You appeared so extremely vibrantly before me just before the wings of death whisked me away and you reached out to me. And then, you told me to live, to not die."

"That's..."

Louie shook his head, cutting off my bewildered words. He placed a hand on his forehead and awkwardly turned back around.

"Can you understand? I have no more friends, and my family and my loved ones, everything slipped away through my fingers! Can you understand the pain of wandering all alone in a world where no one else exists?!"

His voice was low and retrained, but it pierced sharply through the darkness even still.

"If I threw away my sanity, I wouldn't have to suffer any longer, and if I died, I wouldn't have to feel anything. I tried to stab my own heart numerous times. But each time I tried, I'd return to my senses. What if someone else had survived? A sense of hope that shouldn't even have existed kept burning at my heart. I wretchedly held on to my desire for a miracle, despite that I couldn't see even a trace of one anywhere in the world. And this hope that made me want to despair kept pressing me on to live!"

Louie began to talk faster and faster. His emotional words, which had shaken off their shackles of reason, shook me. He continued,

"you looked more like a miracle to me than anything when you appeared, dispelling away the darkness. Like a miracle of the gods."

"I'm not a god....."

"No, it doesn't matter what you really are. Only that you were my salvation. No matter how much you deny it, to me, you're a miracle made flesh. You're a miracle who is brighter than a ray of light shining through the darkness—and yet, you're so cruel."

Cruel—?

"You're telling me to live on by myself? To endure this gloomy darkness all alone once more? You would show me only a glimpse of a miracle, but then leave me behind again? Then why did you save me, why did you reach out to me?! If you don't need me—then it would have been better if I had just died back then!!"

The look on his face was the same one I had seen when he had first met in the forest.

His crazed eyes carried an intense yearning in them.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to leave you behind."

I grabbed Louie's sleeve with both hands.

Louie dropped down to his knees like a sinner and looked up at me.

"Why did you appear before me if you were going to cast me aside?!"

"You're wrong, I didn't mean to....."

My words stopped there. I had never encountered this kind of violent sorrow before. This kind of lament that was so earnest it was almost brutal.

I wrapped my arms around Louie's head when he looked down and hugged him tightly.

—*What should I do?*

Louie, along with his heartbroken scream of a plea, hugged me back as I stood in a daze. Rather than feeling like I was being squeezed back, it felt more like I was touching upon a heart that was on the brink of shattering.

Then, Louie collapsed to the ground, pushing me along with him.

"I want you to kill me if you're going to leave me by myself. Please, grant me repose."

The hard earth was at my back. Louie clung to me by the shoulders as I grew flustered. He had met my eyes for a moment before whispering those words by my ear.

It became harder to breathe as I was pinned down by his sturdy frame. At the same time, I felt his body heat, tinged with his heartfelt feelings, with every inch of my body from my fingers to my toes.

It was my first time feeling that warmth could be so lonely.

"Y, yeah, okay.....I won't leave you by yourself."

That was all I could say.

I looked up at the dull moon and affirmed to myself that I mustn't reject him right now.

If he went back into solitude again, Louie would likely lose sight of what he had been living for.

I couldn't push away someone who was already at the brink of the abyss.

—*Let's stay together.*

"I'll stay with you, Louie."

"__"

Louie wrapped his arms around my waist like he was going to crush me. I could tell that I was trembling, perhaps because I had been influenced by his intense lament.

His firm arms showed no hint of letting me get away. His large and long hands followed along my shoulder and back. It was a gentle feeling with ardor hidden inside of it.

He was chaotically and desperately trying to ascertain that the time we were spending was in fact real. He refused to let go of me because he was afraid I would vanish the moment he did.

"Louie, it's okay. Don't be worried."

It wouldn't have been strange if he had gone insane a long time ago. How much terror and despair had he felt surviving all alone in this wide, wide world? Louie had grit his teeth and lived through the lonely days that he wouldn't be rewarded for no matter how much he had endured through them, even as both his body and heart bled out.

—Will you truly stay with me?"

"Yeah."

Clear doubt still lingered in Louie's eyes. In them, I saw ice-cold solitude.

It was of a completely different type and severity of feeling than the loneliness and longing for company that I felt from time to time.

There were times when I felt a wave of solitude upon hearing someone laughing within the hustle and bustle of a crowd. Those painful moments when I felt different from everyone else even though everything around me was so

vibrant and colorful.

I was in true solitude even if there were people around me as long as I felt alone.

—But.

Even when I was all alone, there was always the chance that someone would turn around to look at me if I said something. I still always had that small bit of hope. Even if we couldn't fully understand each other, and even if I ended up feeling so lonely I didn't know what to do with myself. Even if the other person wasn't a friend or someone I knew, even if they were simply a stranger who I had asked for directions on the street, there would answer me. We would be able to establish a short conversation.

But even this small hope wasn't there in Louie's case. The root of the cause was fundamentally different.

There was no one here. No one would answer him if he asked for directions, no one would smile back if he said hello, no commotions, no footsteps, no laughter, there was nothing—and no one.

I felt a chill just by trying to imagine it. Just who would call out his name? Who would worry about him or wait for his return?

The only thing he would hear were his own footsteps no matter how far he walked. Be it morning or afternoon or night.

Since he was a knight, my existence was probably tiny and unreliable from his point of view. But he was so mentally cornered and exhausted that he looked to me for salvation anyway.

If someone strong like Olin had been here, instead of weak little me, he would have been able to lift the burden off of Louie's shoulders and lighten the load off of his heart. I felt horribly sad after I realized this.

“.....No.”

—.....*It's not that simple, is it?*

I was shocked by the sound of my own voice slipping into the depths of my heart. It didn't matter if I was powerless or not.

It was simply that we had met.

Couldn't our chance meeting become a turning point that could influence Louie's entire life? I felt like he could see it as a wonderful event that could rewrite not only his sense of values, but the very foundation of his mentality.

It was because I could call Louie's name. I could affirm his existence.

—*Did my appearance have that large of an impact on Louie.....?*

An unprecedeted wave of fear welled up from within me. Fate could change from just one little opportunity. Then, what would become of Louie and me in the future, now that we've so distinctly met?

If I were in Louie's shoes, I would be grateful just for the fact that someone other than me existed before my eyes.

This is what Louie had been talking about.

This is what he had meant when he said that I was like a god, that I seemed like a miracle made flesh. I finally understood.

"I'm sorry."

A serious voice left my lips. I felt slightly afraid for myself because I hadn't tried to think things through in the slightest until now. And there was a countless number of problems in this world where "I didn't know" just wouldn't do.

I timidly stroked Louie's light hair. It was clumped up here and there, perhaps because it had been showered by the blood and gore from the beasts from earlier. My chest tightened again at the stiffness of those clumps.

I was sure that his hair would be incredibly soft and beautiful if he washed it properly and brushed it well.

"Louie..."

...let's find somewhere to wash your hair tomorrow. I'll brush it neat with a comb for you.

But Louie began to whisper before I could finish my proposal.

"I don't care if you can't tell me everything. It's alright if you don't trust me.

But please, let me stay—”

He wasn’t even the type of person who would normally plead like this.

I knew just how painful and pathetic it was to beg someone not to abandon you. I idly recalled the figures of my parents, who wouldn’t look each other in the eye.

I opened my mouth in a hurry. I didn’t want to let Louie finish.

“Will you stay with me? It’ll be dangerous for you if you do. I have a wish that I want to fulfill no matter what. But it’s a really difficult wish to fulfil, and I’m not sure if I’ll be able to do it alone. So I’d be really happy if you helped me out.”

Louie looked up and rolled over with his arms still around my waist. He laid up against the hard earth this time as he rested me on his tempered abdomen.

Then, he entwined his fingers with mine and pulled me a little closer to him with both hands.

“I swear to protect you on my sword and on my life. As long——as you wish for it.”

It was foolish of me, but my chest grew hot at his words, which sounded very much like a knight’s oath. Then again, Louie was actually a knight for real.

His moon-colored eyes that carried his strong will and solitude seemed to pierce through my heart. They were so pretty that I forgot to breathe.

“Um..... But don’t die while protecting me or anything like that, okay?”

“My life isn’t dear to me.”

I grew troubled because I could tell that he really meant it.

“You know, it’s okay if you’re protecting me because you have the energy to spare, but don’t throw away your life just to save mine.”

Louie looked hurt as he closed his mouth. A knight’s job was to voluntarily protect important people with their lives. If I told someone in that kind of position not to protect me, it could sound to him like I was denying his existence. And so, I hurriedly added,

"I don't want to see you get hurt, Louie."

"So you're telling me to sit there and watch you die?"

Louie said indignantly and looked away. He continued,

"and then you'd tell to live alone? This isn't some kind of jest. Are you telling me to become a coward who lives on in disgrace after letting you die? Are you seriously telling me to become someone less than the lowliest of brutes?"



I thought that he was being a bit too harsh, but what I had probably said something that his pride absolutely could not allow.

I grasp Louie's fingers, still connected with mine, tightly.

"That's not what I meant. Er, I want you to help yourself, Louie, just like you would help me. I don't want either of us to sacrifice ourselves for the other. If push ever comes to shove, we'll run away ASAP together."

Louie looked surprised as he looked up at me.

".....ASAP?"

"Uh-huh. He who runs away lives to fight another day, right?"

"You are.....a strange person."

"There are a few promises that I want you to keep if you're going to come along with me. Can you swear to keep them?"

"What promises?"

Louie immediately went on guard. It was like he already knew what I was about to say.

"First. Like I just said, you're not allowed to sacrifice yourself for me."

I looked down at Louie, who looked like he was about to argue, and stubbornly pressed on,

"you can't protect someone else if you don't take care of yourself first."

This was something I had heard from Uncle Miharu. His exact lines had been, "*you can't say anything about someone else if you don't take care of yourself first!*". He had pointed out my chocolate addiction when I tried to get him to stop smoking.....wait, I feel like that's a completely different situation from what's happening right now.

Louie pursed his lips, perhaps because my words had hit home. *I won't budge even if you make that face!*

"Second. Stop speaking so formally to me!"

It was because I couldn't take it anymore. I mean, I was younger than him!

"Third. Teach me how to use a sword."

Louie looked dumbfounded as he stared at me. He looked like wanted to veto

this one as hard as he could because he found it way too reckless. *That's rude, you know.*

"I have to learn how to use one no matter what because of my circumstances."

I should have learned kendo or something. Though, it couldn't be helped that I hadn't thought that I'd find myself in this situation even in my wildest dreams.

"Can you promise me these three things? Er, on your sword, life, and to god."

Louie looked incredibly reluctant. His eyes kinda looked a little reproachful. I stopped him by waving my finger a little because he looked like he was about to look away.

It was childish to be indecisive.

"— — I shall swear..... I'll swear it."

He sounded kinda reluctant, but whatever.

Something suddenly pulled at my long sleeve when I grinned. Eru, who had been kept out of the conversation like bugs outside a mosquito net, was looking at me sulkily.

"Oh, I'm sorry."

And then, I suddenly realized. That I was still on top of Louie.

Eru snuggled up to me cheerfully after I hurried off of Louie's hard abdomen.

Then, Eru growled menacingly at Louie, who had sat up. Was I imagining it, or was Eru being really obvious about his antagonism toward Louie.....?

"Eru, it's okay."

Maybe Eru was just surprisingly shy.

I carefully ran my fingers through Eru's steel-colored fur to calm him down since he looked like he'd been lonely.

Eru purred like he liked it, but his round eyes held the tell-tale glint of animosity when he looked at Louie. *Yeah, he's cute, but he's also kinda stubborn.....*

"Louie, let's go back to the fire."

I beckoned for Louie as I pacified Eru, who was in a bad mood for some reason. Louie cast a baffled look at Eru before quietly following along with what I said.

I threw in a few dried branches into the fire in a panic when I saw that the fire had almost died out. Then, I looked up at Louie's face again. *I'll tell him everything. I want him to trust me if we're going to be together from now on.*

I resolved myself and opened my mouth.

"I know this is going to be hard to believe—"

I told Louie in detail about how I was from a country called Japan from another world, about how I was summoned into the world of Evelier, about Silvai and Olin, about my conversation with Fortune, and everything else that had happened leading up to now.

There was only one thing that I didn't tell him.....that I had weighed his life on a scale of pros and cons.

I probably would have felt better on an emotional level if I had honestly confessed and told him about it. But I didn't want Louie to know that I had hesitated to save him back then. Even I knew how cowardly I was being.

I'll make sure to tell him one day.

At first, Louie had a look on his face that I couldn't really describe. But, his complexion changed when I mentioned Fortune and he looked astonished when I told him about Silvai and Olin.

He looked taken aback at the end.

It wouldn't have been an exaggeration to say that he looked like he was in a daze toward the end of my story.

Even still, it would probably be difficult for him to outright deny my story as simple bragging.

For one, Eru was here right before us. I didn't really get it, but there was

something about Eru that made him different from the normal beasts in this world.

Then, there was also the stone on my forehead. Louie had called it a divine stone. I didn't know what powers it carried, but there was no doubt that it was pretty rare.

I decided to wait a while until Louie finished organizing my story in his head.

It was up to Louie to decide whether he would believe me or not.

"Hibiki."

"Yeah?"

Louie finally called out to me in an anxious tone as I was nodding off from fatigue.

"That's, well..."

"What is it?"

I had been laying on Eru's stomach as he sprawled out on the ground, but I knew that I'd get too sleepy to talk if I didn't sit back up. I sat up to make sure I would stay awake and let out a small yawn.

"Oh, my bad. Why don't we talk tomorrow? You must be tired."

"No, I'm good to talk now."

"Well, I thought about it.....and I realized that you were, to put it one way, a complete victim in all of this."

"A victim?"

I had been bracing myself because I was worried that he wouldn't believe me, so Louie's reserved words had taken me off guard.

—*Is that right?I feel like it's not.*

At the very least, I hadn't been a victim when I had hesitated over whether or not to call out to Louie in the forest.

I suddenly got the impulse to tell Louie about that. I really must be weak-willed if I couldn't even take responsibility for the mistakes that I made. I felt

really dejected.

“.....You’re wrong, Louie.”

“Do you hate them?”

“Hate who?”

“The noble being brought about by the gods, no, the people of this kingdom who brought about the calamity.”

I tilted my head to the side. *Do I hate the people of this kingdom?*

“Why?It’s not like the people of this kingdom did anything to me?”

“Hibiki.”

“It’s not like Fortune, the gods, or the people of this kingdom wanted to fight on purpose, but just that they clashed with each other little by little. I don’t think I can forgive Fortune for cruelly trying to destroy the kingdom, of course, but after listening to Olin and Silvai’s story, I don’t think that Fortune’s completely evil or anything and I don’t know who or what to blame or hate.....”

I couldn’t draw a distinct line pointing to whom, or what, to blame.

Hate the sin and not the sinner, was it?

But I also thought that it was people who stained their hands with sin. There wouldn’t be any sin if there were no people. So, did that mean that I should hate people, that it was okay to ignore the series of events that lead up to that point? I couldn’t come up with a correct answer as I was right now because all of these questions were jumbled together in my head.

“Anyway, we should think about how to save everyone in the kingdom before figuring out who to blame.”

Besides, Olin and Silvai said that Japan would be in trouble if I didn’t, too.

Louie looked at me as if he was looking at something peculiar for some reason.

“.....Am I wrong? Did I simplify things too much?”

I asked in a hurry, embarrassed, causing Louie start to laugh cheerfully. It was a nice laugh that was free from worry, but.....”

“.....Louie.”

“No, I’m sorry,”

he apologized, but he was still laughing. I sulked. He continued,
“I didn’t mean to make fun of you. You really are a pure-hearted child.”
A child?!

I was shocked by Louie’s words. It sounded like he was trying to cheer up a pouting kid. I mean, you normally wouldn’t tell a girl that she’s a “pure-hearted child” after she reaches a certain age.

Louie looked off to the side a little and continued to laugh persistently. *I’m glad he’s feeling better, I really am, but...!*

“—My apologies,”

Louie suddenly said in a low tone. I looked into his face to see what exactly it was that he was apologizing for. The smile had disappeared from his face. He continued,

“we shouldn’t have dragged someone like you into our ugly battles. That, above all else, is our greatest sin.”

“No one dragged me into anything, I came here of my own accord.”

“.....This land is teeming with things that are so hideous that you can’t help but look away from them. But you’ll have no choice but to face them as long as you continue to fulfill your promise to the gods—so I’ll make sure to protect you. I offer to you my unchanging fidelity until the day you safely return to where your loved ones await you. As proof of my knighthood, the blood of reason and justice runs through me in the place of water, I uphold a sword of light in the place of wind, I burn a torch of valor in the place of flames, and I offer to you my undying will in place of the earth. My oath shall not be altered until the day my flesh returns to dust.”

Louie suddenly bent over and knelt with one knee on the ground in one refined movement, took my left hand, and gently pressed his forehead to it.

He quickly moved back away from me because of Eru’s displeased growling and smiled wryly as I froze up.

'Fidelity' wasn't a word that I, a completely normal middle schooler who had been born in a peaceful Japan, was used to hearing and it really shook me up to hear it being used so seriously!

Wasn't it supposed to be a great honor to receive a knight's oath?

And he had staked his life on it, too.

"Though, I didn't want someone as young as you to have to witness such depravity."

His bitter words carried a deep remorse in them, almost as if he was speaking as a proxy of the gods. But at the moment, I'd taken great offense because of something else.

"Louie, how old are you?"

Louie tilted his head a little to the side and blinked at my sudden question.

"I'm twenty-six?"

"Eh?"

I was unintentionally taken aback. I'd thought that he'd be older. Both his attitude and the atmosphere around him were composed and his body was in great shape. But then again, he also looked younger than his age when he smiled.

I re-gathered my wits and glared a little at Louie, who looked puzzled.

"Hey, how old do I look to you?"

".....Mm."

I glared even more as Louie's face stiffened up strangely and he fell into an unnatural silence.

"Uh,about twelve or thirteen?"

.....*Is that so?*

I fell back against Eru's stomach, depressed. *Ugh, I can't recover from this. Well yeah, I know I'm short and that I'm not very feminine.*

It was probably hard for Louie, who had sharp and shapely features, to

discern a Japanese person's age from their appearance. But even still, his hesitation just now was a little too much.

Louie had asked me if I was thirteen even *after* realizing that I felt like I was being treated like a child and taking that into consideration.

Which basically meant that he actually thought that I was younger than that. He probably thought that he was being tactful, but he had only dug his own grave.

So, does that mean that he initially thought that I was around ten?I kinda want to die.

"Was I wrong?"

Louie asked gingerly as he stiffened up a little, likely because he realized that he had said something wrong.

"I don't care anymore....."

Even I thought that I sounded dark. I see, so that's why he was so okay with hugging and patting me. He didn't see me as a member of the opposite sex..... This is bad, I really wanna die!

"Hibiki.....?"

"It doesn't bother me at all! Even though I'm technically fifteen!"

"Fifteen!?"

I grew even more depressed as Louie's rude surprise, especially since it sounded like my age was the most astounding thing he'd heard today. He continued,

"I thought that you were extraordinarily sharp for such a young child.....no, it all makes sense if you consider that there are all kinds of people in the world,uh, please don't glare at me."

I glared even more fiercely at Louie, who was muttering to himself in bewilderment.

"What do you mean there are all kinds of people in the world? Do I look like a monster to you or something?"

"That's not what I meant.....and I don't want you to get angry. But I'd thought that you were an incarnation of a goddess."

"A goddess!?"

It sounds extremely fishy since you just admitted that you thought I was a child! And it doesn't make me happy at all!

"I'm going to bed!"

"I'm sorry, I had no intention of making fun of you."

That's what makes it worse!

I buried my face in Eru's stomach in a huff. Eru, ever my ally, snorted at Louie and wrapped his long tail around me like an animal would do to their young.

It's not that I mind, but I feel like Eru's treating me like a child too.

—But thank you, Louie.

He might not actually believe that I'd met the gods deep down in his heart. But he was being considerate for me by not showing even the slightest hint of his doubt.

His kindness in trying to accept everything I said no matter how unrealistic it sounded was warm.

I was sure that credibility was only a trivial problem for Louie. I felt like he would acknowledge my story even if it was complete nonsense and he had noticed that it was.

I wonder how devoted his fidelity is?

He made believing in and adhering to another's words his top priority without caring about whether it was fact or fiction.

Louie really is a knight. I admired him secretly as my consciousness grew hazy.

I was able to spend the rest of the night without having to worry about any more beasts.

I had meant to go to bed in a huff, but I had evidently fallen deeply asleep

before I knew it.

Louie had apparently stayed up to keep watch all night long. The fire hadn't gone out until Eru woke me up in the morning.

We decided to leave the old tree after having the same simple meal that we had last night for breakfast. I wanted to wash my face and take a bath, but I knew from the ruins around me that it wasn't the time to ask for such carefree wishes.

"A village called Urs is the closest from here,"

Louie said as he pointed to a gentle slope.

It was probably the village that he said would take two days to walk to yesterday.

"It'll be dangerous because there'll be Reims, right?"

I asked just to make sure. Your mental preparedness depended what you did or didn't know.

"No, Reims don't appear during the day. They appear as the sun sets and go back to sleep as the sun rises. What we need to be careful of are monsters and starved beasts. Beasts and demonbeasts attack regardless of the time of day,"

"What's the difference between demonbeasts and regular beasts?"

Louie explained it to me as he cleaned up after the fire. I was packing the luggage.

"Beasts were created by the gods while demonbeasts are born from the King of Depravity. Do beasts exist in your world?"

Yeah, I answered while I added, "though they're a bit different from the beasts here" in my heart.

"Then, do demonbeasts not exist in your world?"

"They don't. They're considered to be creatures from fantasy."

Louie brushed off the soot on his hands and gave me a scrutinizing smile.

"Demonbeasts can appear artificially as well. Unlike beasts, they can be summoned by those who know the right spells."

“Do you see demonbeasts often around here?”

“There are a lot of them right now because the world is in such a bad state. Also, the summoners and mages who had demonbeasts under their servitude have all turned into Reims. There are a lot of monsters with half-broken contracts wandering about.”

Demonbeasts, mages, and summoners. My head was spinning. I had really come to a world that was incredible in a lot of ways. Louie continued,

“demonbeasts have ranks, and there are formidable ones and weaker ones among them. There are even demonbeasts with a high level of intelligence.”

“Er, how do you tell them apart from regular beasts?”

“They feel different. Monsters have an abnormal air about them.”

To be honest, I wasn’t confident that I’d be able to tell them apart accurately. Though, I’d called the more monstrous beasts “monsters” when I saved Louie in the thicket. He continued,

“in addition, demonbeasts and cryptids live in different regions. The world also distinguishes between phantoms and apparitions.”

I groaned. Did I really need to be wary of all those different types of creatures?

My anxiety must have shown through on my face. Louie, who had been erasing the traces of our campground as he talked, looked at me with a gentle, yet still serious, gaze as I was completely at a loss.

“There’s no need to worry. I’ll be sure to protect you no matter what kind of monster appears before us.”

“Mmmm.....”

I felt like Louie would keep his oath even if it meant using his own body to shield me from danger.

“Louie, have you, well, have you fought an intelligent monster before?”

“Yes, a few times.”

Louie looked stern, perhaps because he was recalling the times he had

exterminated demons in his past. He continued,

"it's not possible to fight a high-ranked monster by yourself, especially if it's humanoid. You would need to command an elite battalion with mages at the very least to even hope to rival it in combat."

"A battalion.....?"

How many people made up a battalion again? More than a thousand? If you needed that many people just to rival it in combat, didn't that mean that monsters are ridiculously strong?

I leaned back against Eru, who had snuggled up against me, and furrowed my brows as I fell into thought.

Will I really end up having to face humanoid monsters during my journey?

"Hibiki."

Louie leaned in before me as I was looking down and continued,

"I'll protect you. I want you to trust me on this."

I did trust him, but I was also worried that Louie would sacrifice himself for me if he felt like he had to. I didn't want him to expose himself to danger in order to protect me, but I felt like he would break any promises he made to that effect.

That being said, I could tell that even if I forced Louie to put his safety first, he'd either get bewildered or sad because he would mistakenly think that I was denying his reason for existence.

This is hard. I pat Eru's face as I worried.

"Okay, thank you."

Louie smiled humbly at my answer for now. He was a mature, strong, and chivalrous knight. And yet he still had an austere air about him that made my heart race.

I'm so glad the first person I met was someone was kind as Louie. The thought suddenly popped up in my mind.

"Should we head out soon?"

Louie nodded with his gentle gaze still on me when I asked.

We left the old tree that we stayed the night under and proceeded through the wasteland with the faraway hills in the corner of our eyes to the left as he headed for the closest town.

I couldn't see anything around us moving, save for a few raven-like black birds that cawed in cracking voices as they flew high up in the sky. There was only the creepy, skeleton-thin trees that popped up at irregular intervals.

The ground was dry and there were so many cracks in it that it looked like stone pavement. A cold wind blew from time to time, stirring up a low cloud of sand that obscured my field of vision each time it did.

The sky was dull, as if it had been filled up with concrete. It really gave the impression that the entire world was frozen. There wasn't any danger present at the moment, but I still couldn't keep from being anxious.

I looked away from the gloomy sky and looked at Louie's profile as he walked next to me instead.

"Louie, aren't you tired? Tell me if you wanna take a break, okay?"

"—Oh. You don't need to be concerned about me. And Hibiki, you'll fall off the sacred beast if you lean out like that,"

Louie answered self-consciously as he lowered his eyes.

Actually, I'd had a small quarrel when we departed.

It was with Eru.

I had planned to have Louie ride Eru as well so we could shorten the time it took to get to the town.

Apparently, Eru greatly disliked the idea of letting someone other than me ride him.

At first, I'd thought that it was because carrying two people was over his carrying weight limit, but that evidently wasn't the case.

He had apparently only obediently let Louie ride him when we rescued Louie

from the beasts because it had been an emergency situation. It looked like Eru had actually been quite reluctant about it.

No matter how much I tried to coax him, Eru persistently and firmly continued to refuse by growling as if to say, “no!” and shaking his fur. Eru’s mood soured considerably while I continuously tried to plead with him.

He would hit my arm lightly with his long tail the moment I looked away and stare at me with resentful eyes. In the end, he began to ignore me completely and even refused to answer me.

Louie magnanimously forgave the sulking sacred beast by saying that we shouldn’t force him to do something he didn’t want to.

According to Louie, it was only natural that a beast in service of a god wouldn’t want to let anyone else ride him.

Evidently, Eru was not only shy, but was quite prideful as well.

I wondered if the truth was that Eru actually didn’t want to let *me* ride him either. That maybe he had given up on refusing to let me ride him because of Olin’s orders.

Then, when I decided that I’d travel on foot as well in order to build up my stamina, Eru was shocked and looked at me like he was hurt. He desperately crouched in place and stubbornly refused to move even when I called out to him.

Finally, Louie advised me to ride Eru in a quiet tone, perhaps because he had carefully considered Eru’s low spirits.

I had started to get stubborn too, at that point. Just like Eru, I glared at Louie with resentful eyes.

Louie politely offered me his opinion with a serious look on his face in a manner that ultimately convinced me. First, there was the difference in Louie’s and my respective stamina. And the difference in our constitution. He said that the journey would take longer if I, who was familiar with Eru, went on foot as well, and that there wouldn’t be much benefit to it. Louie said that walking was no problem for him because he was used to traveling. And, most importantly, he said that it would be more dangerous if we were attacked by beasts or

monsters while I was on foot.

I wanted Louie to teach me self-defense and how to use a sword precisely *for* those times of danger.

But, while he never clearly refused, Louie would nonchalantly change the topic whenever I brought it up.

.....And so, as a result of our quarrel, I ended up riding on Eru's back alone. Both Eru and I were still in a bad mood.

Louie was an adult about it and didn't touch upon the subject again now that it'd been settled and brought up another topic instead.

"Hibiki——I wanted to ask, but you said that you received that sword from a god of war, right?"

"Yeah."

"Then, does that mean that it's possible to save people if it's with a divine sword?"

Louie looked deep in thought as he cast a glance at me.

"A divine sword.....?"

I whispered quizzically to myself before it hit me. Since Olin, a god, lent it to me, I should be calling it a divine sword.

"Would I be able to wield it as well?"

Louie asked in a strangely serious tone.

"Er, what do you mean?"

"I don't think anyone can use a divine sword just because they want to."

"I dunno..... Olin never said anything about that. Do you want to use this sword, Louie?"

When I asked in return, unable to see what he was trying to get at, Louie looked away for a moment and looked hesitant.

"I'm used to handling a sword. Wouldn't it be better for me to wield it?"

I had the strange feeling that he was trying to gloss over something important

for some reason.

"What do you think, Eru?"

Eru could understand human speech since he was smart. When I asked for his opinion, he looked at Louie coldly and shook his head as if to say, "not a chance." His steel-colored mane swayed like a wave.

"As I'd thought, I can't....."

Louie looked bitter.

"As you'd thought?"

His wording caught my attention. It sounded like he'd had a similar experience before.

"There's a divine sword in my kingdom as well. Only those with strong ties to the royal family may wield it."

".....The royal family?"

I think I stiffened up quite a bit. I felt like I was finally faced with something that I knew was coming and was afraid of.

A royal family means a king, queen.....clothes lined with furs, and a crown. What else? The utter lacking of my imagination made me miserable.

"The story behind it has been passed down as a myth—in the beginning, when the world awoke from chaos, the First King who governed over the earth was said to be a god. New Queen Gallè was founded by the First King and is the oldest kingdom in the world."

The First King.....that's Olin!

My heart beat faster, though I knew I was being imprudent. It was amazing that someone I knew was being talked of as a myth by others.

"The great and clever King's glorious name was Queenza Gallend. His name was shared by the kingdom so that the light of his wisdom and glory may shine for all of eternity."

".....Hmm?"

Was that what Olin's name was in the past? But before that, isn't the kingdom

called something else?

“Queen.....isn’t that a woman’s name?”

“It’s said that the founding king never chose a queen. He declared that the kingdom itself was his bride.”

That’s kinda like Queen Elizabeth from England, who’s said to have married her country!

I didn’t think I’d find something historically similar to my own world in something like this.

Olin, you’re so cool!

Wait, but didn’t Olin say something like he wanted to welcome me as his wife?

.....So which one is it, Olin?

“Thus, it’s said that the kingdom’s name is a feminized version of the founding king’s. It meant that he would share his fate with the kingdom as would a man and woman who exchanged their marital vows with love.”

I see, I thought as I nodded deeply.

Louie laughed a little as he watched me be impressed.

“This founding king’s vows continue to this day as a tradition. None of his successors have welcomed a queen.”

“Huh, all this time?”

“The king’s spouse will always be the kingdom itself.”

“So are all kings single?”

Would that mean that the royal lineage wasn’t hereditary? Louie was startled when realized what I really meant to ask when I looked at him, puzzled, and oddly looked away.

.....His unnatural attitude told me everything I needed to know.

“Do kings here have lots of lovers, or many even a harem?”

I muttered to trick Louie into answering, and he looked extremely perturbed and extremely regretful about bringing up the topic.

He misunderstood me. I'm not selfish enough or nit-picky enough to be grossed out by the various reasons that adults do dirty things.

People in power surround themselves with women in any country, and it wasn't all that historically rare either. I'm dead set against it on a personal level, though.

".....I'll have to ask Olin about it later."

"Hibiki?"

"No, it's nothing."

Louie looked at me timidly. There was no point in criticizing Louie about this. I also wanted to show him that I could be more mature when I wanted to.

"I guess they can't help it, since they have to deal with problems to do with heirs, political support, and territory. They probably aren't free to choose their lovers too, right? Being in a position of power can be pesky like that."

Louie opened his eyes wide and made a complicated expression when I sensibly said my piece.

My knowledge about this topic came.....not from my history textbooks, but mostly from manga and movies. You just couldn't look down on how surprisingly profound Japanese entertainment could be.

"Well, I'm sure that there are kings who went wild too.How is it, Louie? What was the previous king like? Or actually, you wouldn't happen to be the type to be okay with things like that, would you, Louie?"

"Hibiki, that's..."

I felt that Louie keenly wanted to change the topic. It might have been because my voice had naturally gotten lower. Plus, I'd started to glare at Louie, who technically didn't have anything to do with the conversation, too.

"Hey, Louie, do people in this kingdom practice polygamy by any chance?"

Louie huffed a little and tried to dodge my question by pretending to survey our surroundings.

Whoa, no way. That reaction means that they do!

Wait, if Olin's the First King, does that mean that he's the perp who established the laws surrounding marriage in the first place?

“.....I’ll make you confess everything one day, Olin.”

“Hibiki?”

“It’s nothing!”

“Oh.”

The truth was that I actually wanted to ask more about Louie’s sense of values and circumstances, but I decided against it.

If he had a lover.....or a wife, they would have turned into a revenant——a Reim. I didn’t want to make him sad by asking about it so casually.

“But I want you to have some peace of mind knowing that the majority of commoners are monogamous.”

Louie, I’m pretty sure you’re just adding fuel to the flames here.

Put another way, that meant that people of high statuses were married to multiple women.

Besides, it was suspicious that he said only the “majority” of commoners think this way. That basically meant that there was a small proportion of people who weren’t satisfied with having only one wife. How immoral!

“Can we go back to talking about divine swords?”

Louie swiftly changed back the topic of the conversation because he had sensed the restlessness in the air and realized that he had stepped on a landmine

What were we talking about again? Err, something about divine swords.

“The royal family inherited the blood of a god. Only those from the royal family may wield the divine sword that the founding king left behind.”

“Huh. So that means...”

“The royal family has a divine sword as well.”

I was surprised. That meant that people from the royal family could also use a

divine sword to turn Reims back to people.

“They do?”

“Yes. The founding king granted a divine sword to the king of every kingdom so that they may dispel monsters whenever they appear.”

“But, haven’t the royal family turned into revenants too.....?”

“Which brings us to my next point, Hibiki. I’d like for us to head straight for the capital before visiting any other towns if possible.”

“Do revenants.....Reims all stay in the same place?”

“I don’t know the exact logic behind it, but Reims adhere stubbornly to the places where they were born and raised or to places they were strongly attached to, perhaps because their past memories chain them there.”

“I see. So if we first go to the castle and turn the king back to normal.....”

It would mean that there would be more people who can use a divine sword.
.....*I should be happy about that, right?*

“—Our king has already passed away. Or rather, he killed himself.”

“He killed himself?”

“He was a human sacrifice. At first, everyone thought that the deterioration of the kingdom was a punishment from the gods. There were more than a few of the king’s retainers who held the foolish, baseless belief that it was because the king had disobeyed the will of the gods and was leading the kingdom down an unjust path. And so, the king offered up his life in order to avoid the coming calamity, but—”

Political corruption had nothing to do with it.

The calamity befalling the kingdom in itself was something that ran counter to the will of the gods, and things wouldn’t change for the better even if the king sacrificed his life.

As a result, the kingdom lost its leader and that probably led to even more confusion and disagreements.

“With the throne still vacant, the kingdom could do little else before it fell.”

Louie's eyes looked distant as he looked into the past. The expression he wore was a mixture of resignation and bitterness. He continued,

"there are currently two divine swords in Gallè. There were originally supposed to be three, but one was buried along with the king when he sacrificed himself. As for people who can wield them—the second prince, His Royal Highness Griffao Diekrobe can. The seventh prince, His Royal Highness Sazadieg Sodawelnas can as well."

"Grif.....?"

"I would like to first save the two royal princes."

"Uh, yeah, okay."

Louie looked back at me and smiled in relief when I nodded in a hurry. I added,

"um, there was something I found strange, though."

"What is it?"

"People who've inherited the blood of the royal family can use divine swords, right? But Louie, you only specified the second and seventh princes. Aren't there more than just two princes though?"

I'd found it strange that the ability was limited to just to the two of them.

I didn't know exactly how the royal family tree worked, so I might have been mistaken. But shouldn't there also be people like the first or fourth princes, or even princesses in between?

"The late king had ten children. However, only the two princes I mentioned are able to wield divine swords. Only those who've inherited more of god's blood than others are able to touch them. The two princes are also the only members of the royal family who possess succession rights to the throne."

I felt like the conversation had taken a dubious turn.

There are a lot of times where blood relatives struggle against each other over succession rights, retainers carry out assassinations for status, and all kinds of other disturbing Machiavellian troubles that arise from monarchies, right?Or at least, that's what I'd gathered from the western films that aired at

9pm when Uncle Miharu watched TV.

Well, it's wasn't as if these strange and complicated politics would have anything to do with me, so there probably wasn't any point to me prying into it.

"So, are we still going in this direction?"

I wondered if the capital was a large city.

"Yeah. First, we'll secure necessary supplies from the village of Urs, and then I'd like for us to go south to the town of Lavann, where there is a temple."

Uh, umm? I grew profoundly confused.

"Lavann.....?"

"The village of Urs doesn't have a temple, after all. It'll take about seven days to reach Lavann, no, we might need a few more."

"Um, Louie?"

I hurriedly called out his name and drew back his attention since Louie had begun muttering to himself as he sank deep into his thoughts. I had no idea what he was talking about. I asked,

"why do we need to stop by a temple in order to get to the capital?"

"Oh, my bad. I forgot that you weren't from this world."

Louie abruptly returned to his senses and looked back to me again as I rode on Eru's back. I lowered my eyes ever so slightly.

There was a flicker of feelings like sorrow and disappointment in Louie's eyes for a moment. Or at least, I felt like I'd seen something like that in them.

I knew next to nothing about Evelier, so I had to ask Louie to explain everything whenever we talked about anything or else I wouldn't understand. Louie probably felt as vexed as I felt hesitant and would probably be forced to re-realize that I was from another world each time it happened like he did just now.

I'm sorry. I apologized to him quietly in my heart.

"Most temples generally have ritual tools kept in reserve for emergency situations. There should be something that lets you translocate among them. If

we can get one to work, we'll be able to make our way to the capital, Jinshan, without having to undertake a long and dangerous journey to get there."

I desperately forced my brain to work. I didn't want Louie to awkwardly think that I was some troublesome child who needed everything to be spelled out for me.

Even adults get annoyed if they're continuously barraged with a child's "why's" and "how's" even if they were okay with it at first, right?

Let's see, ritual tools. I wondered if those were items like a mage's staff from fantasies. And, translocation was probably the same thing as teleporting.

Louie wanted to go to a town called Lavann because there might be convenient tools in the temple there.

And, the town of Lavann was located down south of the village of Urs.

But could I, a normal person, use those ritual tools? Wouldn't they require a special spell or something? I didn't know any spells though, so would it still work?

"I've translocated multiple times before, but I don't know if the tools will still be there."

Oh, I see, Louie's no doubt translocated before. I was relieved. It probably also meant that I didn't have to worry so much anymore.

It'll be okay, it'll be okay, I repeated over and over again in my heart.

A single black bird flew through the concrete-colored sky as if it was splitting it in two.

I abruptly cast my gaze at Louie's profile. He was so absorbed in serious thought that it looked like he had forgotten that I was sitting here right next to him.

My heart wavered a little. I was about to call out to him, but ultimately decided not to.

I wondered where this loneliness was coming from. I couldn't find an answer no matter how hard I looked for one.

 ‘Divine stone’ (*shinseki*, 神石) in Japanese is homonymous to the Japanese word for ‘relatives’ (*shinseki*, 親戚)

Chapter 4: The Oath in the Forest

I was under the illusion that we were vainly walking in circles because the scenery hardly changed as we walked.

According to Louie, the area we were in wasn't too far from a highway that was often used by peddlers and travelers or something. And, there was supposedly a forest coming up ahead soon.

We weren't using the highway because it wasn't possible to make it to Urs village in a day.

We would have to spend the night outside no matter what. Evidently, it was more dangerous on the open road because we would have nowhere to hide ourselves.

Besides, while we wouldn't have to worry about getting lost if we took the highway, it actually took the long way around to our destination. Which would mean that we would be wasting time and meant that the forest something of a shortcut.

We found the remains of a stream that had once flowed through the area. The long, meandering cavity it left behind was completely dried up.

Not only did we decide to pass through the forest because it would save time and would be safer in a crisis, but also because we needed to secure water. The entire world had become dehydrated, making it rather difficult to get your hands on any water.

Speaking of which, Louie had looked apologetic after he drank more than half of the water in my water bottle when we had first met.

"Have you been in forests this entire time?"

I felt like it would have been easier to secure food and water if he had lived in a town or village.

"It was safer than staying in a town even after taking the danger of encountering beasts into consideration. Especially at night. You would have to

worry about Reims attacking all night in a town.”

“Oh, right..... You wouldn’t really get much sleep then.”

“Beasts come all the way inside of towns in search of food. And there are monsters that were freed from their summoning restraints in large towns with establishments like temples. Beasts and monsters attack regardless of the time of day. Since beasts will attack in both locations, it’s better to hide in a forest where you have a lower chance of encountering a Reim.”

I was rendered speechless by Louie’s harsh but rational explanation. Then, he turned to look at me with a serious expression on his face. He continued,

“Hibiki, there’s something I want you to promise me. Don’t ever leave my side. It’s comparatively safer now—in the morning, than it is at other times of the day, but even then, I can’t say that it’s completely safe. I want you to stay where I can see you.”

“O, okay.”

I keenly felt the tension in his voice, causing my answer to naturally become more serious in response.

I tightly grasped Eru’s steel-colored fur. I didn’t have any reins, so it was the only thing I could grab on to.

Eru turned back a little at me and growled sweetly, perhaps because he sensed my anxiety. *Right, I’m not alone.*

Louie, while still concerned about a possible beast attack, seemed to want to reach the village during the day when there weren’t any Reims. Every break we took was calculated, and he checked the road carefully as we walked.

I’d lost my sense of direction a *long* time ago, mostly due to the unchanging scenery, and I didn’t even know if we were getting closer to the village like we were supposed to be.

—*I’m useless here, aren’t I?*

A dark forest appeared before us as I obediently followed Louie’s instructions as we continued our travels, though I was still a little depressed.

I subconsciously furrowed my brows as I looked to it. The forest had a

disquieting atmosphere to it that made me think that the words, “forest of death,” suited it quite well.

The trees that just barely still had leaves clinging on to them looked hard and on the verge of death. Their countless branches, which shot up to the heavens, were sharp. They looked like thorns.

I eventually grew fatigued with time even though I’d been riding on Eru’s back this entire time, maybe because I’d been so tensed up. My conscious broke away from time to time and my body slanted diagonally.

“Hibiki, it’d be better for you to lay down, instead of sitting upright,”

Louie urged me gently, probably because he had seen me. He was trying to let me, the person who had it the easiest here, rest, instead of scolding me.I wonder why I’m more vexed about it than happy.

Eru was long since he was big enough to carry someone as large as Olin. He was long enough that I could lay down and sleep on him.

“I’ll call you if something happens.”

“.....But...”

I bit down on my lip. Louie didn’t sleep very much last night because he’d been watching over the fire all night long. I’d slept properly the whole time, and it wasn’t like I’d done any strenuous exercise or anything either.

It was Louie who needed more rest, hands down.

“It’s only natural that there’s a difference in stamina between you, a lady, and me, someone who’s trained on a daily basis. I want you to rest a little.”

Louie hesitantly reached out and gently pressed down on my shoulder as I hung my head. I knew that I shouldn’t let this go on, but my body felt so heavy I couldn’t resist. Louie continued,

“don’t worry, and sleep.”

His words echoed within me, and—.

I woke up after feeling my body suddenly swaying.

I grew uneasy, as I would have been if I had been made to sleep in a pitch-black room, as my mind struggled to catch up with reality.

My consciousness finally cleared up upon hearing Eru's low warning growl from directly below my body.

I abruptly looked up to see that my surroundings were already surrounded by a heavy, fog-like darkness. The outline of the trees, darker than the night itself, shadowed the area and made it all the darker.

From the eerie atmosphere it created, the sound of splashing water, the terrifying sound of something being cut down, and the sound of someone stepping on the low wild grass echoed around me and pierced my ears.

"Louie?"

A giant sword drew a white line as it brilliantly cut through the darkness and cut away at the writhing shadows.

--No way!

We're being attacked by something dangerous—either beasts or demonbeasts!

"Louie!"

Louie's sword mowed down the last creature as I shouted. I squinted, still astonished. There were multiple large creatures laying around Louie, who held up his sword.

With his sword still tightly in his grasp, Louie approached Eru, who was waiting on standby in the shadows, and me with long strides.

"I spilled blood. Other monsters will be here soon. Let's hurry and move somewhere else."

I realized that his words were directed to Eru, not me. Eru, as intelligent as always, growled in agreement and followed after Louie without hesitation.

"Now, hurry."

I heard more beasts growling from far away. I trembled.

Louie never let his guard down even after we left the area where blood had

been spilt, and Eru never once tried to stop either. He simply wove through the trees while trying to hide his breathing.

Afterward, we were attacked about twice before we finally found a place to rest.

Louie, and only Louie, had thrown himself into battle while all I could do was watch from a safe distance.

We decided to rest in a cave with a crooked slope that connected it to the outside that looked like an abandoned beast's den.

Louie exercised the upmost caution as his gaze surveyed our surroundings and, after he led me inside while I was at a loss, he immediately ran back outside.

I couldn't even call out to him because I knew that it wasn't a smart idea to shout.

After Louie left, Eru laid down at the entrance of the den as if to seal it away.

—It was to protect me as I was still inside it.

Both Louie and Eru acted without the slightest pause, as if they had planned for this ahead of time.

All I could do was curl up and wait for Louie to return. My heart was beating loudly and fast. *I'm so stupid. Why did I just fall asleep without another thought back then?*

I frowned as I recalled the fight from earlier. *I haven't done anything.*

I didn't come to this world just to be protected. But, contrary to how I felt, reality still existed as it was.

"It's because I haven't tried to do anything...."

My heart suddenly grew cold. I was really pathetic. Haven't I simply been pushing off all of the responsibility on Louie? I couldn't let this continue.

I stood up, pulled out the sword I had received from Olin from the luggage, and tried to go outside. Eru was laying down at the entrance. When I

approached him, he got up as if to say, “you can’t,” and refused to budge no matter how much I begged him.

“Eru, let me through.”

Eru refused to listen no matter how many times I asked and he pushed his nose against my chest when I tried to force my way through. I couldn’t get violent with Eru, and he would catch up to me soon even if I somehow luckily managed to slip through because he was more agile.

“Eru!”

Eru growled quietly, flustered, when I raised my voice a little in protest. Even then he still wouldn’t let me outside.

“I hate this, Eru!”

I held my sword as if I was clinging on to it as I stood there.

Eru put his nose on my arm and snuggled closer in a somewhat troubled manner. He was trying to console me in my misery. Knowing that made me feel all the more pathetic.

I forced myself to stop trembling by gritting my teeth. Eru licked my cheek. I lost the tension in my body at his fawning behavior.

Eru wrapped his long tail around me when I sank down right where I stood. I pressed my face into his warm stomach as I cursed my uselessness in my heart.

It was quite a while later when Louie finally returned.

“Thank goodness, Louie.....! Are you injured?! Are you hurt?!”

I rushed up to him and checked over his entire body. I couldn’t help it in my worry that he had suffered a deep wound somewhere.

Louie placed his gigantic sword against the inner wall of the cave and smiled softly while looking at me and Eru in turns.

“I brought some wood for the fire.”

Louie was certainly carrying dried branches that looked like they’d make for great firewood in one arm, but...

“Wrong!”

I couldn't help but shout.

—*Lies, such lies.*

I clung tightly to Louie's waist as he faltered. *There, look, it's the smell of blood. And it's really, really strong.*

He might have been followed by beasts all the way here.

Had Louie gone through the trouble of putting me in the safety of the den and leaving by himself so that I wouldn't see the fighting?

He had undoubtedly acted as bait to draw out the beasts' attention and finished them off somewhere farther away.

And then, he had gathered dried branches as he returned so that he could tell me the kind lie that he had simply went out to take a look at our surroundings.
—Just to give me some peace of mind.

"I'm sorry."

I had left everything dangerous, everything painful, and everything scary all to Louie.

"You're not hurt anywhere? Your wounds from before haven't opened up again?"

When I desperately looked up at him, Louie silently knelt on the ground and placed the branches he had been carrying off to the side. I followed along and stooped over as well.

For whatever reason, Louie, who had just gone through something terrifying, had a kind and somewhat bashful smile on his face.

"I'm not hurt—thanks."

Why are you thanking me?

I couldn't keep down my rising emotions even though I knew that I had no right to blame him. I was glaring at Louie before I knew it.

Louie didn't look displeased with my actions at all as he awkwardly reached out for me. Timidly, he touched me on the slope of my shoulder and stroked it kindly.

“.....I want to hear your voice.”

I don’t get it. Are you sure you aren’t hurt?

“Louie, you can’t do stuff like this, it’s unfair. You said that you’d wake me up if something happened!”

I was the one who was being unfair. I was throwing a temper tantrum like a child! I continued,

“you can’t put yourself in danger all by yourself like that!”

I knew that I was being fairly selfish as I complained at Louie, who had faced the beasts by himself to ensure my safety.

I hated myself for being too arrogant to keep myself from complaining.

“Yeah.....thank you, Hibiki.”

He thanked me again. Louie dropped his forehead into my shoulder as if to hide his lonely, moistened gaze. It was like he was spoiling himself a little.

Oh no, is he holding back pain from being hurt? Is he actually so exhausted that he can’t even stand?

“Go rest inside. I’ll keep watch this time. Go sleep a little.”

All Louie did was nod a little without a word with I grabbed his hand to urge him to sleep and he didn’t look back up for a short while.

Louie muttered something that was more or less reasonable and prepared the fire by himself despite that I had said that *I’d* do it.

I understood that Louie was far more skilled at it than I was, but I wouldn’t be able to learn anything if all I did was stand by and watch all the time.

And, in the end, Louie sat down near the entrance where it was the most dangerous!

It was only during times like these that Eru and Louie shared a mutual understanding with each other. Eru would promptly wrap his long tail around me whenever I tried to move and would bite at my robe’s long sleeves in order to hold me back on purpose. Louie moved quickly while Eru held me back and

finished all of the preparations by himself.

I'm angry, you know!

Eru, perhaps because he was more sensitive to my fury, would periodically push his nose against me in an attempt to make me feel better. Louie, on the other hand, looked a bit more troubled, but he would still dodge my questions in a tone completely devoid of any malice while refusing to budge. What did you say in times like this again? That it was all a waste of effort?I was probably wrong.

But, no matter how they try to indirectly refuse me, I'll definitely take watch for tonight!

Louie hadn't slept at all. He would ruin his health if he didn't sleep properly no matter how used to camping outside he was and regardless of the fact that he was strong enough to defeat monsters.

After a tasteless, simple meal, I stood up exactly as Eru yawned and sat down by the inner wall close to the entrance.....in other words, where Louie was.

I made sure that I was carrying the sword I had received from Olin just in case.
“Hibiki.”

I ignored Louie as he called out to me, bewildered. *I won't budge.*

Eru growled from deep within his throat and stared at me while scrunching up his nose like he was making a grim face, but I ignored him too.

“.....Then let's do this: we'll take watch in turns. I'd like you to rest first.”

I wasn't about to fall for his sweet words. It seemed fair at first, but Louie wouldn't wake me up until just before we left if I accepted his proposal without a second thought.

“In turns, huh. That's fine, but I'll take watch first.”

“No, that's...”

“It's more dangerous later in the night, isn't it? In that case, I think it'd make more sense if I took watch first.”

Despite what I'd said, I actually didn't plan on waking up Louie either. We

were both lying to each other. Louie's burdens would only increase if I didn't forcefully assert myself.

Eru, perhaps because he had noticed how Louie silently let his gaze wander, slowly began to get up as if to say, "then I guess I'll do something about this."

"You can't, Eru. We'll be relying on your legs if anything happens, so you need to make sure to rest properly."

I quickly stopped him before he got up completely. Eru got back down despondently when I glared at him.

"Won't you let me keep watch until you get used to traveling?"

Louie, who had given up on tricking me, drew a little closer and began to persuade me in a serious manner.

"I want to do stuff like this *because* I want to get used to traveling,"

I responded quickly without turning my eyes away from him.

"Hibiki, I'm really grateful for your feelings. But what would happen if we get attacked while you're on watch? You don't know how to use a sword, do you?"

Louie refuted hesitantly but with eyes that told me that he wouldn't give in.

I helplessly lowered my gaze, unable to say a word. He was probably right.

I could say anything I wanted now because it was safe. But I wouldn't be able to do anything but tremble without offering the least bit of resistance when danger really closed in.

"I'm not ignoring your consideration for me. But I don't want to see you facing danger. I'd like you to let me be selfish."

He wasn't being selfish. Louie had chosen his words carefully as to not hurt me while he opened up his heart.

"But Louie, you haven't slept at all."

"I've been napping. Besides, Hibiki, I've been spending the nights alone until now. It's not difficult for me to keep watch."

Eru, who had been watching over us, came closer and snuggled his nose against my cheek as I gripped onto my sword tightly and looked down, unable

to say a word. His steel-colored fur tickled when it brushed against my face.

"I'm sorry. For being useless."

My voice sank down as low as it could go.

"No, there's no need for you to bear that responsibility."

Despite Louie's swift denial, I still felt like I did.

"Hibiki."

Louie hesitantly reached out and gently touched me on the chin when I refused to look up, frustrated by how powerless I was. He continued,

"all I need is for you to be here."

His voice was so quiet that it seemed to melt away into the faint darkness.

"I don't want for anything else,"

Louie said as if he was saying a prayer and quickly moved his fingers away. Eru turned around and pushed his forehead against my arm to urge me back inside before I had the chance to ask Louie what he had meant.

I waited to see Louie's reaction, puzzled, but he wouldn't look back at me. He was stubbornly looking off to the side as if he was holding something back.

Late at night. It was pitch black.

I woke up to the feeling of something soft swiftly wrapping around my body.

The fire had been extinguished. Eru's long tail had completely sealed away my ability to move. I realized that he was doing this to keep me from making noise.

—*What about Louie?*

He wasn't here. He wasn't inside the cave.

I felt the tension in the air rise at once and heard something fall to the ground from far away.

Eru nimbly got up all of a sudden, grabbed the luggage with his mouth, and skillfully threw it lightly on his back. He got down and waved his tail as if to signal me to get on before I could get up in my state of fright.

I fastened the luggage to Eru's back in a panic and got on. Eru vigorously dashed out of the cave the very moment I grabbed onto his steel-colored fur.

The scent of blood that permeated the air was so thick that I wanted to cough.

"Where's Louie.....?!"

I asked, half shouting, and Eru lithely turned around and swiftly ran forward after a moment of hesitation. The cold wind, dyed by the color of night, hit against my forehead and the sleeves of my robes fluttered audibly like a bird taking flight. I felt a bloodthirsty presence.

—*Louie.*

A beast's terrifying howl resounded as if it was cursing the world and eventually melted into the darkness. It sounded somehow twisted, like it was a person's scornful voice rather than a beast's howl, and the ominousness of it made my heart leap.

Eru ran fluidly across the uneven ground and approached the place where a second howl had come from. Behind the trees. He was there.

I saw a black shadow against the weak moonlight. And a large, sharp blade that was far more vivid than the moon.

"Louie!"

The scene of the fight burned into my eyes. Louie held his gigantic sword with both hands as he swung it upward as if he was chiseling away at the earth. Standing before him on two legs was a hideous monster.

It had human-like hair. It had oddly large eyes and many uneven fangs sticking out of its mouth. There was short fur here and there across its thick torso, and four arms splintered from its elbows.

What a creepy creature. I stared at it blankly as my shock overcame my fear. I couldn't believe that this monster was alive just like us.

Louie cut the hideous monster vertically with the swing of his sword. I heard the horrible noise of its entrails falling to the ground. Yet, the monster was still agile even after losing its intestines. Instead of bringing his bloodied sword back

closer to him, Louie swung it diagonally in the same momentum. I think he was trying to cut off the monster's head.

The monster tried to block Louie's sword by raising its arms. It sacrificed one of the arms that splintered off from its elbows as it was cut off, but there were still three left—.

"Louie, dodge!"

I screamed reflexively. The monster took no interest in the arm that had fallen off and swung another one and ran its razor-sharp claws against Louie's upper arm.

"Eru!"

Eru crouched down as low as he could while I was riding him and wedged himself in between Louie and the monster in one go. I grabbed the hilt of my still-sheathed sword with my eyes closed and thrust it hard against the monster's abdomen.

The monster faltered for a moment at our sudden intrusion.

The sword that I had recklessly thrust forward had luckily hit one of the monster's wounds and it fell over backwards while letting out a harsh, anguished scream that seemed to make the very air quiver as it resounded.

"Louie, get on!"

Please, Eru, let Louie on just for now!

Eru made a displeased growl but didn't stop me when I reached out for Louie, who was kneeing on the ground on one knee. Louie took my hand even as he grimaced from the pain in his arm and swiftly jumped on Eru's back.

The monster got up just as Eru began running again and brought up its arms once more. Eru avoided its claws just before its attack hit and sprang forth like an arrow.

There were several carcasses on the ground that belonged to the monsters that Louie had defeated. Among them were a few that still twitched like they were still breathing.

"Hibiki, get down!"

Louie said strongly in warning as he pushed me down against Eru's back.

The fight wasn't over yet.

Eru skillfully wove through the trees that made it difficult to see. I shivered as I had the ominous feeling that many *somethings* were gathering around us. It was the oppressive feeling of a trap closing in on us.

I swallowed down the spit that had pooled in my mouth numerous times and ran my gaze around my dull and dark surroundings.

I heard the sound of something stepping on the dead leaves on the ground.

The darkness steadily quivered. Something howled.

Then, the monsters that had smelled the blood and heard us fighting drew closer.

"What do I do....."

I felt like I'd let out a scream at any moment if I didn't clench down on my teeth so hard I that I lost feeling in my jaw.

I had never been in such a terrifying situation before, not even close.

I'd thought that it'd be as fairytale-like as heaven had been, that I'd be able to do something about the situation with my own strength, that it'd be—.

If it *was* that easy, Louie wouldn't have cried after seeing me. His kingdom wouldn't have fallen, either.

"Don't go where it's out in the open! It's make us easier to target!"

Louie called out instructions in a strict voice.

The monsters followed us relentlessly now matter how much we ran and ran.



Eru single-mindedly continued to run through the darkness that was brimming with bloodlust while carrying us without a single moment's rest.

A monster would ambush us from the side on occasion. Louie blocked it with a swing of his sword each and every time they did. It was all I could do to keep myself from making a sound.

How long the night was. I clung on to Eru's back and closed my eyes as I trembled like an idiot.

Several of my regrets ran across my chest.

I should have just stayed in heaven without acting big. If only I hadn't so readily sworn to go to Evelier. If I had accepted Fortune's offer. If I hadn't left the ryokan alone and followed the clown and the children in the first place—.

I hadn't known that I was this weak.

I wanted to go back. I wanted to do everything over again. I wanted to back to a time much before I'd even met Fortune. If only I could go back to a time when my parents had laughed merrily from the bottom of their hearts.

Dawn crept closer as I entertained my cowardly thoughts and I could tell that the darkness of the forest was slowing being swept away.

We'd been able to shake off the majority of the monsters, but there were a few left among them that were agile and intelligent. Those, we would apparently have to finish off.

"Hibiki, don't ever get off,"

Louie whispered in a stern voice and swiftly jumped off of Eru's back before I could even have the chance to stop him.

"Louie!"

I looked back in a panic. Louie's figure moved farther away into the distance before my eyes because Eru hadn't decreased his speed.

"Go on ahead!"

His sharp yell overlapped with the joyous cries of the monsters that had caught up with him.

"Eru, no! Go back!"

Eru wouldn't go back no matter how urgently I asked. He continued to glide

across the ground with me riding on his back.

“Then I’ll jump off!”

I shouted impatiently. Eru growled sharply once as if he was reprimanding me. He slowed down a little, but still refused to stop completely.

—*I can’t leave him behind!*

I knew all too well that I’d only get in Louie’s way if I was around. But, just as strongly, my instincts told me that I absolutely had to go back for him no matter what. I cleared away my cowardly wishes and gentle memories. I was always, always regretting things. I’ve had enough of that.

I gathered up all of my strength and jumped off of Eru as hard as I could. But...

—*No way.....!*

Eru had turned around partly and somehow managed to catch me by the back of my collar with his mouth mid-air as I fell down.

“Eh?!”

My body was thrown up into the air like luggage. My field of vision spun and in the next moment, with a light shock that ran throughout my entire body, I had returned to my original position on Eru’s back.

Wha.....what just happened?!

I was dumbfounded.

“—Th, that was mean, Eru!!”

Eru growled lowly with his head hanging awkwardly downcast, perhaps because he was pitying me for my pathetic complaints against him, and turned around to change directions.

“Eru!”

I grabbed tightly onto Eru’s back in joy.

—*He’s going back for me!*

Eru was going back to where we had left Louie even as his growls were colored by mixed feelings. He was probably worried because.....who knew what

I'd do next if he let me be.

I quickly found Louie fighting against the monsters because we apparently hadn't put as much distance between us as I'd thought.

"Louie!"

Louie dodged a monster that had rushed at him with a hair's breadth and used the rotation of his body to swing his sword. He looked astonished upon seeing that I'd returned.

"—Why...?!"

"Behind you!"

I shouted, cutting off Louie's whisper. The monster had turned around and was trying to bite at Louie's back. The monster had a tiny head, contrary to its large quadruped limbs. Its head looked like a cute squirrel at first, but its mouth split open all the way to the back of its cranium the moment it tried to bite Louie and it exposed its true ugliness along with the three long tongues peering out of its mouth.

Louie returned his gaze to the monster and pierced its throat with the tip of his sword. It wasn't deep enough to give it a fatal wound. The monster flew into a frenzy and wrapped its long tail, which split in two mid-way, around Louie's arm.

"Don't come here, Hibiki!"

—*As if anyone'd just nod and obediently do as you tell them to!*

I pulled at Eru's mane and signaled him on.

Eru obediently obeyed, exasperated, and dashed toward Louie.

"Hibiki!"

Eru looked back for a moment and growled quietly. He was trying to tell me something.

—*Right.....the sword that can cut through anything that's not human.*

I swiftly drew my sword from behind and raised it up recklessly high as Eru leapt at the monster. I was going to cut off the long tail that was wrapped

around Louie's arm.

I'd prepared myself to feel some sort of resistance as I cut through it, but my sword cut through the monster's tail as easily as if it was made out of spiderwebs and it made a noise as if something was melting away.

I was shaken by the unexpected lack of resistance and ended up losing my tension. I'd had a hand and both of my legs fixed on Eru's back so that I wouldn't fall off, but my waist still ended up floating up in the air.

My balance crumbled further because Eru had leapt at the monster and raised his upper body ever so slightly at the same time.

I was flung off from Eru's back in spectacular fashion.

"I, I'm fall.....!"

I screamed and reflexively shut my eyes. I naturally stiffened as I imagined how much pain I'd be in from the impact of falling down to the ground.

—*Huh?*

I heard the dull sound of something crashing into something else.

But it didn't hurt.

".....Louie?"

I opened my eyes in a panic. I found myself on top of Louie, who had landed on the ground on his bottom.

He had caught me.

Louie and I looked at each other for a moment. The beautiful color of his eyes pierced deeply through my heart for some reason. We stared at each other wordlessly as if time itself had stopped.

Our special time faded away as Eru growled as if he was angry. I turned around to see that Eru was fighting back by biting the violent monster in the flank.

When I tried to get back up in a hurry—a white light flashed next to my face.

It was Louie's giant sword.

Louie's sword was thrust deep into the monster's forehead by the time I'd blinked.

After we defeated the monster.

Eru carried Louie and me and continued to run without resting even once until the night was completely over. We encountered beasts a few times along the way but were able to shake them off because they luckily were not that agile.

Louie didn't say a single word the entire time we were riding on Eru.

Eru only stopped when we finally reached a basin that looked like it had once been a spring.

I'd hardly moved, but I felt like there were stones on my shoulders, perhaps because I'd been tense all night long. Plus, my thighs were stiff and my waist felt heavy because I'd been riding Eru in the same position this whole time.

I plopped down to the ground as soon as I got off of Eru's back because my legs couldn't support me. Eru cooed in worry and licked my cheek. *Sorry, Eru, I'm sure you're much, much more tired than me.*

"Thank you, Eru."

My body was suddenly lifted into the air while I was petting Eru's face to show him my appreciation for his efforts.

Louie carefully carried me in his arms like a child and began to walk toward an old tree off the side of the basin that was probably at least a hundred years old.

"Stop! You hurt your arm!"

Louie didn't let me down even after I called out to him in a panic and continued to walk without a word.

Is Louie.....mad?

I felt like there was a stern atmosphere around Louie as I timidly peered up at his face.

Louie quietly put me down by the roots of the old tree as I stared up at the

look on his face, which made him difficult to approach at the moment, in confusion. All of the trees around here were thick with large knurls.

Eru silently came closer, sat down next to me, and gently stroked my arm with his tail like he was seeking a reward. As he did, Louie undid the luggage that was fastened on his back.

I crawled to where the luggage was and checked the contents. There should be medicine somewhere inside.

“Louie, show me your wound. We have to treat it!”

My hands were unsteady, perhaps because I was still tensed up, and I clumsily spilled things on the ground for no reason.

Oh, what do I do? Which medicine was I supposed to use again? I became more confused the more I panicked and ended up moving about more than it was necessary.

“Oh, right, I have to give you water, Eru. You must be thirsty because you’ve been running this whole time, right? Hold on a sec.”

“Hibiki.”

“Y, yeah?!”

I jumped because Louie suddenly called my name in such a flat tone. How embarrassing. My voice betrayed me.

Louie sat down on the ground with one knee in the air. But he wouldn’t look me in the eye. My unease grew stronger until it finally became discouraging.

“Um, I’m sorry. I wasn’t useful at all, was I? I can’t do anything without Eru.”

I wonder why I had become such a chatterbox who was prattling on one lame excuse after another.

“I told you to go on ahead.”

There was no censure in Louie’s voice. Not only did he not sound angry, but there was no emotion in his voice at all. The air about him was still hard. It would have been so much better if he was being outwardly angry.

“Oh, but.....I can’t do that.”

"I swore to stay by your side to protect you. But to think I'd be the reason you were brought back into danger."

I shook my head as hard as I could. I realized that his heart was freezing up with feelings of self-reproach.

"You know, I don't want to do anything to you that I myself would hate, Louie."

Louie finally looked at me. A somewhat sorrowful light.....as if he was angry at something, filled his eyes. I continued,

"I'd really hate it if our positions had been switched and I was left behind. I'm sure it'd be lonely and scary to be all alone like that. Even if my feelings for wanting you to run away to safety were stronger, somewhere in my heart I'd still want you to not go anywhere because I'm a coward."

That was how I truly felt. Of course, I'd still ultimately be happier if he escaped to somewhere safe even as I wished he wouldn't leave.

Feelings took a lot of different shapes, not just one. It might just be that the feeling that took the clearest shape overpowered the others and became your will.

"And I believe in Eru's speed. I knew he'd do something about it somehow," I added and pat Eru on the forehead.

Eru rustled his whiskered a little and happily rubbed his nose against my thighs, evidently in a much better mood after I pat his forehead and the area around his ears.

Eru, you're so cute. I really like the gap between your ferocious appearance and your cute behavior.

"I couldn't breathe——when you came in between the monster and me,"

I found myself hard-pressed to find the right words to respond with. I'd accidentally let down my guard and let my tension down and had fallen off of Eru's back, hadn't I.

"Sorry, I was heavy, wasn't I? I've been trying my best to go on a diet, but it hasn't worked at all....., did you hurt your back?"

I nervously looked all over Louie's body. *Oh, right, he hurt his arm!*

"Let's get that treated, okay?"

Louie looked slightly pained as he closed his eyes.

Chapter 5: Fate Revolves

We took a light nap after we finished treating his wounds.

Then, we entered the forest again and headed for the village of Urs in the afternoon.

The depressing atmosphere never changed. Everything was bleak and dreary and the air felt like a dying whisper.

“—Let’s stop here for today.”

Louie, who had hardly spoke along the road, proposed when evening was upon us.

“We still have some time until night though?”

“The trees grow thick around here. They’ll be useful for hiding from the beasts. And— I’d like to rest early today.”

“.....Sorry, your wounds hurt, don’t they?”

“That’s not what I meant. I want to head out before dawn tomorrow. Because I want us to arrive at Urs when there aren’t any Reims.”

Louie eyed a large tree that looked like it was opening its arms out wide and pointed to it. He continued,

“that looks like a good place to stay. It has a think trunk, so we’ll be able to hide ourselves.”

“Hey, Louie, you said that there’re Reims in the village of Urs, right? Wouldn’t it be better to change even one or two people back human?”

“.....No, let’s find the princes first.”

Louie stubbornly refused to nod in agreement.

I was dejected. I couldn’t say that I was reliable even if I lied, but Louie wasn’t even including me in the headcount. He was putting all the emphasis on the resurrection of the princes who could also use divine swords.

My dejection soon turned into feelings of alienation. To turn Reims back

human and prevent the destruction of the kingdom. I was the one who had come here with the duty to make that happen.

“.....We’re making a fire, right? I’ll go get some branches!”

“Hibiki, you shouldn’t go off alo——”

“It’s okay, I won’t go far!”

I jumped off of Eru’s back when we arrived by the base of the large tree.

I argued down Louie, who was bewildered, and went off on my own to find branches we could use for a fire. I wanted to show him that I could be at least a *little* useful.

Eru growled anxiously and moved to accompany me. He waved his tail in a wide arc when I shot him a glare and sat back down in a lonely manner.

I was a little disgruntled by how Louie and Eru looked at me like they were worried guardians watching their child do something dangerous. I really didn’t plan on going far.

I quietly furrowed my brows and rolled up the long sleeves of my robes as I began to walk away.

I’ll walk around the large tree where Louie and Eru are and pick up branches there, I guess. I’ll need dead leaves too. Plain wood doesn’t catch fire that easily.

I found a strange shrub while I was looking for branches that looked like they would burn well.

Its trunk was shaped like a jug and its rind was rough, as if it was made out of a countless number of hard scales.

There was a hollow in the thickest part of the trunk that looked large enough to hide a small child.

“I wonder what’s up with this hollow. Was it made by people?”

I timidly looked into it and was promptly surprised.

There was a pool of water in the hollow.

“Nice, we might be able to drink this!”

My heart was bursting with anticipation. I probably wouldn't have thought to drink this if I was still in Japan.

But water was precious in this world. The whole land was parched, and even its springs and streams had all dried up. It didn't seem like it'd rain anytime soon even though it was cloudy.

This was a huge find, because I was getting worried about how we'd secure more water once we'd used up the water in our luggage.

I placed the branches I was carrying on the ground and scooped up some of the water in the hollow with my hands.

".....It looks okay. It's not clouded, and it doesn't smell weird either."

The water was smooth and clear. It didn't even have any dirt in it.

"I'll ask Louie if we can drink this."

No matter how reckless I was, I knew enough not to drink the water based off of my own judgement. I lightly shook the water off my hands and stepped away from the hollowed shrub.

"—?"

I heard a strange noise from behind when I turned around and had taken a step back to where Louie and Eru were.

It's not the sound of beasts. It sounds like a bunch of flapping wings?

I stiffened up from the bad feeling I got. A black shadow covered over me as I turned back around.

—*No, it's not a shadow!*

It was a cloud of insects.

A cloud of the countless insects that had been hiding within the hollow.

A wave-like buzzing echoed before my eyes. A countless number of tiny, elliptical insects swarmed me at once and latched on.

I shuddered in a different way from when we were attacked by beasts. My breathing grew ragged as revulsion overshadowed my fear.

I mean, a cloud of bugs had just swarmed me—.

I couldn't move as my mind blanked out.

“—Hibiki!”

My petrification finally became undone as Louie's voice reached my ears.

“No! Noo!!”

This is disgusting.....!!

I screamed and vigorously waved around my arms to hit at the bugs that were crawling and writhing on my arms, shoulders, neck, head, thighs, chest.....all over my body.

“T, they won't come off!”

The blood drained from my face. The speedy insects were crawling all over the surface of my body as they pleased. I was repulsed by the brush-like feeling of their legs and antennae on my skin as they ridiculed me.

“Help!”

I screamed like an idiot and ran about. The bugs crawled inside of my clothes. Down from my collar, and up into my sleeves.

From time to time, I felt a prickling pain from somewhere on my body like I'd been bitten by an ant.

I didn't even have the time or leisure to get embarrassed about the shrill screams I was letting out.

“Hibiki!”

“No, I hate this!”

Louie paled and came running, but I wasn't in any state to answer him. I desperately flapped around my arms and legs to get rid of the insects. But even if they flew away at first, they would come back for me like magnets and cling on to me again.

The bugs, the bugs won't fall off!

The insects squirmed around my body like snakes. They were small and

beetle-like, and exceptionally shiny. The buzzing of their wings echoed from my ears. I couldn't get rid of the chills I got from the feeling of their thin legs and antennae on me. *I can't do this, I really can't, I feel like my heart's gonna explode!*

"Louie, hel.....!"

I'd long since stopped caring about appearances. I felt so disgusted that I thought my consciousness would fade away.

The insects began to burrow into my hair too. They tenaciously clung to me and noisily crawled about my skin no matter how much I shook them off and shook them off.

I can't take this anymore. I resolved myself to strip off my robes.

"Don't move, Hibiki!"

I saw Louie through my blurry vision as I came close to losing my mind.

He had caught a bug that was significantly larger than the others. Unlike the insects swarming me, his looked a like a bee with a beautiful, aquamarine body that looked like a jewel. Louie put it in his mouth for some reason.

"Lou....."

He swiftly drew closer to me. Then, he bit down on the bug's body with a crunch and let its bodily fluids pool into his mouth. After that, he started blowing on the insects swarming around me.

The bug's fluids, which was a red-purplish color that strangely didn't look like blood at all, stuck to my robes.

Just then, the insects buzzed and flew away like a receding wave just as I smelled the fluid's strong odor.

"Huh.....?!"

The insects had flown away almost all too easily. As if they were afraid of the fluid that Louie had blown at them.

Louie let the creepily colored fluid pool in his mouth again and walked around me to blow it on my back.

The insects crawled audibly as every last one of them went back into the hollow.

I was frozen stiff as I stared blankly at Louie.

Louie spat out the rest of the fluid in his mouth before looking back to me and signaling me to take off my outer robe with his finger.

I did as I was instructed and, after undoing my sash in a hurry, took off my long outer robe. Then, Louie warned me not to touch the fluid by pointing at the red-purple stains on the surface of my clothes and waving his finger. Of course, I didn't *want* to touch it either.

I was wearing another robe of a similar color underneath the long one, so I didn't resist taking it off.

Then, I hugged Eru, who had drawn close to me, to seek comfort from him. I was finally able to feel relieved after feeling his fluffy fur.

I wasn't as scared as I was disgusted, and I thought I was gonna pass out.....

The tips of my fingers were still quivering. I'd never thought in my wildest imaginations that there's be a large swarm of insects inside the hollow.

That clear water was probably bait for catching prey. They probably used numbers to take down bigger prey.

—*Wait, what about Louie?!*

He'd let the fluid of the boss-like bug pool into his mouth in order to help me.

“You have to hurry and rinse out your mouth!”

Louie smiled as if to say he was okay and then took me gently by the arm to guide me to where the luggage was.

The ever-intelligent Eru guessed our next move and picked up the luggage, which had been placed in the branches of the tree, in his mouth. *Oh, I see, it's probably better to move away from here.*

Louie gently picked me up, as I was still moving awkwardly from the fear and chills I'd just experienced, and placed me on Eru's back.

Then, Eru led the way to search for another place to stay.

We decided to camp at the base of another tree after walking around for ten and a few minutes.

"Louie, you have to rinse out your mouth."

I offered Louie the water bottle as soon as I'd unfastened the luggage from Eru.

The water bottle still about one-thirds filled with water. We'd been drinking frugally in order to save it.

Louie nodded lightly, poured out a little bit of water into his hand, and rinsed. Eru stared at him as he did for some reason.

"Louie?"

Something felt unnatural. Louie turned around, as if to avoid talking to me, pulled out a new long robe from the luggage, and placed it on my shoulders.

"Um, Louie. I'm sorry for being so rash."

He shook his head as if to say that he didn't mind. Then, he left to find branches for a fire after a brief survey of our surroundings.

I watched Louie as he worked, a little perplexed. What was it? Perhaps he was giving me the cold shoulder because he'd finally gotten tired of my stupidity.

I knew that I shouldn't think this way. But even still, there was a small part of me that was accusing Louie of being cold. I wanted him to ask me if I was alright, even just once. I still felt helpless because I could still feel the bugs crawling all over my body.

"I'm acting too spoiled, aren't I....."

Just how much of a burden did I plan on being to Louie? My chest tightened as my mood dropped like bricks. I wanted to be useful; it hurt to be thought of as a large burden.

Not only had I gone off and declared that I'd find branches on my own and caused an unnecessary uproar, but in the end, I'd even caused trouble as well. I had no right to criticize Louie for being cold.

I began to hate myself so much that I couldn't stand it.

Eru pushed me lightly on the arm with the tip of his nose just as I let out a sigh and hung down my head.

“.....Eru?”

Eru pushed his nose into my hand and stared at me as if he wanted to tell me something. Then, he slowly turned to Louie, who had returned with the branches, and narrowed his round eyes.

“Louie.”

I walked up to Louie, feeling uneasy from Eru’s inexplicable behavior.

Louie looked away ever so slightly and smiled as if he was troubled.

He slipped right past me and swiftly started a fire with the branches he had brought over.

I starting to get my gears rolling. Eru was looking at Louie while moving his whiskers up and down in a meaningful manner. He was trying to tell me something.

I plopped down right in front of Louie, who was taking out the tasteless food we always ate from the luggage.

Louie looked a bit bewildered as he stopped moving for a second and looked to me. But in the end, he still didn’t say anything.

The fire wavered and dimly lit up the forest, which had begun to grow dark. Louie’s profile, lit up orange by the flames, looked stubborn, as if he was trying to cut off my gaze.

“Louie?”

I called out to him and grasped lightly onto his sleeve. He smiled back at me in response, but his moon-colored eyes were still facing downward. His behavior confirmed for me that there was definitely something wrong.

“Look at me?”

I resolutely reached out for his cheek only for him to obviously avoid me.

My head hurt right to its core. Multiple thoughts surfaced across my mind and each one asserted that it was the correct answer in rapid turns.

When Louie had rinsed his mouth, he'd poured the water into his hand first instead of bringing the bottle directly to his mouth. Why had he taken the trouble to do that?

I recalled the pungent smell of the aquamarine bug's bodily fluid.

Louie had let that fluid pool up in his mouth and blew it out to get rid of the insects that were swarming me.....but now that I thought about it, he'd only blown it onto my robe so that it wouldn't touch my skin. Then, he'd signaled to me with his hands to take it off.

The poisonous-looking color of the fluid had smelled so strongly that I teared up. The other insects had fled at full speed. Was that aquamarine bug some kind of queen, like how a queen bee controls the worker bees?

And what if the queen had such a powerful poison in its body that even the other bugs were afraid of it—?

And Louie wasn't talking at all!

"Louie!"

My heart jumped uneasily. A numbing sense of anxiety spread throughout my body and the back of my neck grew cold.

I tried to cling to Louie to dispel my ominous feelings, but he looked away for some odd reason and gently pushed me back. Blood rushed into my head.

"Don't run away!"

I forcefully climbed on top on Louie's knees and clasped my hands on both sides of his face.

Louie didn't seem to have expected me to do something like this and he placed his hands behind his back and pulled slightly away in mute amazement.

"Louie, open your mouth for a bit."

Louie looked down and smiled wryly at the strong tone of my voice. Then, he glared kindly at me as if to question my behavior.

"Hurry."

He simply shook his head to pretend that nothing was up no matter I much I

pressed him. His lightly-colored hair, tied up behind him, was a little disheveled. One lock of hair that he must have missed stuck to my hand as I kept it wrapped around his cheek.

The crackling sounds of the fire melted into the silent forest.

“If you don’t open up, I’ll pry your mouth open with my fingers.”

Louie looked bewildered and pushed against my shoulder as I desperately badgered him and tried to move me off of his knees. At this rate, I’d be forced off of him. I desperately and stubbornly clung on to Louie’s waist like I was hugging him.

I’ll really pry your mouth open with my fingers if you don’t listen!

Louie panicked a little upon seeing how keen I was about it. He pushed more strongly than he did before and tried hard to push me off. I tried to resist him, but Louie was obviously stronger than me. I needed backup.

“Eru!”

Eru, my loyal guard, drew closer and surprised Louie by pushing the latter down by pressing his forehead against Louie’s chest.

Then, he anchored Louie down by mercilessly stepping over Louie’s arms with his front legs.

Eru looked down at Louie, who was dumbfounded, and snorted as if to show off his victory.

I, too, sat back down on Louie’s abdomen to weigh him down. Louie’s eyes opened wide in astonishment.

“Open up.”

Louie looked horribly flustered as he turned away and tried his best to get up. He probably could have managed it easily if he only had to deal with my body weight. But I had a strong supporter with me.

“Eru, Louie won’t listen to me!”

Immediately, Eru let out a low growl that surprised even me to threaten Louie, who was still persistently trying to get away. Then, Eru changed positions

and laid down by Louie's side and took the latter's arm in his mouth.

Eru was only trying to keep Louie from moving, of course, so he didn't actually bite him.

Still, Eru, with Louie's arm in his mouth, bared his fangs as if to threaten Louie that he'd seriously bite if the Louie moved.

Louie's face stiffened upon seeing Eru's threat. Still, he looked unhappy when I, still sitting on his abdomen, tried to pry open his mouth.

"Geez, just give it up already!"

Louie gave up and relaxed his body after a short struggle. I jumped on that chance to use my fingers to open up Louie's mouth.

"Louie—!"

My vision grew dark and the feeling that my heart would get crushed spread throughout my body.

The inside of Louie's mouth had festered reddish-black as if it had been burnt.

"No way."

Even his tongue had turned pitch-black, as if it had necrotized. His saliva was a strange color and the skin behind his lips was melting off.

No wonder he couldn't talk. Not with this kind of pain.

"What should I do.....!"

My temples began to throb painfully.

It was my fault. I'd let Louie pay for my rash actions.

He'd warned me so many times not be reckless.

But all I did was rebel for no reason and I didn't even try to listen to Louie, who was used to travelling and was familiar with its dangers.

On top of that, I'd even been uncooperative because I'd selfishly decided that he was being "cold". Just how much of an ungrateful idiot was I?

I abruptly recalled what Fortune had said. He'd said that I put aside my own powerlessness and blamed others when reality didn't go my way—and he

was right.

My body began to grow cold, as if someone had poured freezing water on me.
What do I do?

"Medicine, Eru, get the medicine!"

Louie gently shook his head when I shouted. He looked at me with his moon-colored eyes that were as kind as ever and didn't have even the slightest tinge of blame in them.

"I'm sorry!"

This wasn't something that an apology could solve.

What do I do, Olin? I came to this world to help its people. And yet.

—I might end up killing Louie.

I was aghast. Why was I taking it so easy and being protected, when I was supposed to be the one doing the protecting?

There was someone who would get hurt for me. Someone who would wear away his own body to take my pain and suffering away.

"I'm an idiot."

Louie hesitantly touched my shoulders in consideration for me as I lost the words to say. I learned of my own hypocrisy in his unclouded gaze. I'd disgustingly condemned myself for my helplessness and now I was trying to use that to buy his pity.

Eru, who had let go of Louie's arm, rubbed his face against me in worry.

"Will the medicine.....not work?"

I didn't understand anything unless I asked. This fact, too, pierced my heart.

Louie smiled reservedly and shook his head. I guess the medicine used for external wounds didn't have the ability to detoxify poisons.

I tried but ultimately failed to apologize again and ended up pressing my forehead against Louie's wide chest. Louie slowly sat up and gently pat me on the back as I clung to him.

What can I do, Olin?

I stiffed up and covered my mouth with my hands. Rinsing his mouth probably hadn't done anything.

But wouldn't the poison eventually pass through Louie's entire body if this was left untreated? It was his mouth, of all places. More toxins would end up entering his body every time he swallowed his saliva.

I closed my eyes tightly shut. The gentle hand patting my back actually hurt me instead.

Is there really no way to heal him?

I desperately rummaged through my memories. There could be a clue to save him somewhere. Anything would do.

My brows started to hurt, probably because I'd been thinking too hard. I subconsciously placed my hand over my forehead, and then I felt something hard. The stone of my forehead.

"Oh....."

—*The crystallization of the power the gods gave me.*

But what kind of power was it? Would it let me use magic?

This world was filled with wonders. Mages and sorcerers existed here. Which meant that I might be able to use magic too. But I didn't know a single spell.

I focused my consciousness at the darkness that spread out before my closed eyes.

I could tell that Louie was worried.

Why won't he blame me? He should just curse me out loud. Then, I realized that I had been the one who had stolen way his ability to talk and it hurt so much that I thought my heart was shredding to pieces.

"What can I....."

Louie gently placed his fingers on my chin when I bit down strongly on my lips and lifted my head up. He looked peaceful. His moon-colored eyes narrowed as if they were whispering to me that I didn't need to worry.

"I'm sorry—"

I don't know the spell.

I don't know how to heal you.

But, I know for certain that the gods gave me power.

That's what makes me a part of their.....household.

So, if I don't know the spell...

Then instead...

I'll bless you, as someone of the "gods' household".

After taking a deep breath to solidify my resolve, I slowly reached out and grabbed onto the hair that had fallen on Louie's cheeks. His eyes, which looked back at me in a slightly puzzled manner, were beautiful.

—*A blessing to heal. Will it work?*

Gods were supposed to have pure presences. In theory, I should be able to share that purity with others as someone of the gods' household..... I want to believe I can.

I didn't want to get thrown off, so I readjusted myself by wrapping my arms around Louie's neck. I quickly grew nervous, and I felt like my heart would jump out of my throat even now.

“—!?”

Louie opened his eyes wide in surprise.

—*Sorry.*

I quickly crashed my lips against his.

Louie immediately stiffened up. It felt like he had been taken aback because he couldn't understand what I'd done.

On the other hand, I was recalling what had happened when Olin had kissed me and was desperately trying to do the same thing. I felt something surprisingly soft on my lips.

Er, wait, what was it supposed to feel like again? I don't remember.

I need to adjust my angle, and...

I have to open his mouth, or I can't take out the poison!

“!?”

Louie promptly placed his hand on my shoulder as I squirmed. He seemed extremely shaken, but I was just as confused as he was.

I awkwardly put my lips to his and timidly drew Louie's head in closer.

Ahh, I don't know what to do. What do I do, Olin! It's hard to breathe, and my heart's beating so hard it hurts.

Louie stopped breathing as he trembled slightly.

I don't know anymore, I think I failed. Louie wrapped his arm around my back as my heart lamented.

His sturdy arm wrapped snugly around me. After pushing out a small breath, he skillfully changed his angle and deepened our kiss.

“.....!”

I screamed inside of my heart. A shock of electricity ran through me as our mouths opened and our tongues entwined. It traveled down my throat, passed deeply through my body, and heated up as it dispersed.

This—was similar to what happened when Silvai had blessed me. I felt the heat swirl as I felt chills.

Our tongues entwined even more strongly as I thought idly to myself.

I almost scowled when I tasted the sharp bitter taste of the bug's bodily fluid.

But, it was something else that made my consciousness feel like it was going to fly away. Something gently traced along the inside of my mouth, intensified, and entwined again. Louie groaned once with his lips still over mine. He soon kissed me back strongly and my consciousness blurred for a moment. It felt like we were kissing like two lovers would, and it was intoxicating.

And then I realized.

It was probably all right now. The sharp bitterness and numbness that I'd tasted from his mouth had disappeared.

I tried to pull away in relief.

Louie.

“Mmph!?”

I pulled a little at Louie’s hair in a panic. *Y, you can let go of me now!*

He placed a hand on my chin while I was in confusion and pressed his lips against mine once again. In any case, I could clearly feel the softness and his warm body heat. A heat, different from that of a blessing’s, ran through me as I was indulged in this sweetness over and over again. What was I supposed to call this contradictory sensation? Love? It was kind and intense despite it’s unreliability. Plus, I couldn’t breathe.

—*Louiee!!*

I was incredibly flustered. *Wait, ahh!*

And just when am I supposed to breathe!?

All the strength suddenly left my body. I was going to suffocate. I was breaking down in more ways than one.

I indirectly felt a strange impact when I finally thought that I was going to die. Or, should I say that it was more like a crash?

Grr, I heard Eru growl in irritation.

Louie’s arm relaxed as he gently took his lips off of mine. *Uwaa, I don’t really know what else to say, but uwaa.*

I could finally breathe. I felt relieved even as I breathed raggedly. My cheeks burned brightly on their own.

When I secretly peeked up, I saw that the edges of Louie’s eyes were somewhat red and that his slightly parted lips looked surprisingly suggestive.

There was charming expression on his face that he would normally never let show. I was captivated before I knew it.

For a short while, his moon-colored eyes, which held an intense burning heat within them, reflected only me.

And then, there was another strange crash.

Eru had headbutted Louie's back.....

Louie blinked a few times and slowly turned around. He stared blankly at Eru, who was looking back at him with a grim gaze.

Grrrrr, Eru growled, his growl sounding more like an angry threat than mere intimidation, while scrunching up his nose.

Eru.....that's quite a face you've got there.

Eru came to my side as I recovered from my absentmindedness and pawed against the ground maliciously. He slipped under Louie's hand, which was still on my chin, and pushed his face through the space in between us. Then, he pressed his forehead against my chest and tried to push me away from Louie.

"Eru.....?"

Louie came back to his senses and stirred. He looked back and forth between Eru and me in surprise.

Eru, who had evidently grown more vexed, forcefully put me on his back as my eyes wandered around. He skillfully pushed Louie away as he did.

"....."

Louie blankly watched it happen without any resistance. When his gaze met mine after Eru had moved me a bit away, he froze up like time had stopped.

That reaction kinda hurts.....

Eru, my acting guardian, wrapped his tail around me as I watched Louie fully regain his senses.

"Um, is your mouth better now?"

Louie was caught off-guard and stared at me for a while. He came back to when Eru growled in ill humor and awkwardly covered his mouth.

"Can you speak?"

Louie slid his long fingers down to his throat and took a deep breath.

".....Yeah, the pain and the numbness have disappeared."

He sounded a little hoarse, but it evidently wasn't much of a problem.

Fatigue and relief came down over me at once. It'd been an all-or-nothing gamble, so I was really glad that it worked.



"I'm sorry, Louie."

Louie looked at me with a mystified light in his gaze with his hand still on his throat when I apologized to him one last time.

Afterward, Louie took watch while still acting extremely awkwardly.

As for me, I had a horrible headache that hurt so much I couldn't stand up, perhaps because I'd used the <Power> I was given without fully understanding how I was supposed to use it.

Eru eagerly came over and hit my arm with his long tail as if to tell me to lie on him. My lips naturally curled into a smile as I felt his concern for me.

I gratefully leaned against his steel-colored abdomen and buried my face in his fur. The fur on Eru's back and mane was a little stiff, but the fur on his stomach area was very soft and fluffy —the absolutely best kind of texture. It was like being covered in a down quilt.

Eru's warmth spread across every nook and cranny of my body as I felt Eru's steady heartbeat and I grew incredibly sleepy.

Oh no, I'm about to make Louie be the only lookout again. But even as I thought that in one corner of my heart, I couldn't resist sleep's call as my consciousness sank deep into darkness.

A cloudy morning. I woke up to a reserved voice calling out my name.

“—Hibiki.”

A quiet but deeply anxious voice quickly brought my consciousness back up from the clutches of sleep.

“Louie.....?”

I sluggishly got up. I rubbed my eyes and looked up at Louie, who was nervously peering back at me.

“Mm....., sorry, was I asleep this whole time?”

My body felt heavy and slightly numb, maybe because I'd been frozen in deep sleep for too long.

Louie, who'd been observing me seriously as I was still in the process of

waking up, let out a short sigh of relief. He massaged his brow with one hand as if he had suddenly remembered how tired he was.

Both Louie and Eru, who was sitting in a docile manner, looked extremely distressed for some strange reason.

“You kept sleeping, even after an entire day had passed,”

Louie whispered hoarsely as he looked up.

I stared back at him blankly as I pondered over his words for a bit. Then, I looked around in confusion.

The scene before me had hardly changed since the time I’d gone to sleep. It was strange.

“How are you feeling?”

Louie watched me keenly, so that he wouldn’t miss even the slightest of movement.

“Um, was I really asleep for an entire day?”

I couldn’t believe it. Did that mean that today wasn’t the day after the evening I’d been attacked by the swarm of gross insects, but *two* days after that?

It was like I’d been robbed of a day’s worth of time without even realizing it.

After a brief moment of absentmindedness, I suddenly realized several things at once and panicked.

“Louie, Eru, I’m so sorry. For sleeping so soundly all by myself. Er, have both of you been making sure to eat?”

Louie and Eru both seemed like they would have seriously put caring for themselves second to keeping watch over me.

My palms started to sweat as I panicked. Sleeping for an entire day was much too sloppy and careless of me no matter how you looked at it.

Louie covered his eyes again and looked down as I was in a fluster.

“Louie, get a little rest. I’ll keep watch.”

I hid how shaken I was as I pulled a little at Louie's arm. I could easily tell by how tired he was acting that he hadn't gotten any proper sleep.

Louie roughly brushed back his hair with both hands. His lightly colored hair fell from between his fingers. I grew a little scared at how stern he looked.

".....Um, I'm sorry."

I'd slept through an entire day. Louie might be so irritated at me that he was letting it show.

I'd grown ashamed of the sheer number of times I've held us back due to my own carelessness and formed a fist on top of my knees when I felt Louie stir.

"You wouldn't wake up no matter how many times I called.I thought that you might never open your eyes again."

After hearing his somewhat hoarse voice, I understood that Louie had been more afraid than I had been worried.

Eru also cried out in a heartrending manner and restlessly pushed his nose against my shoulder.

I'd slept like the dead, hadn't I?

Had I really slept that deeply.....? I was exasperated by my own sleeping habits.

No wonder why my body felt so stiff. My arms and legs were so sluggish. But, my mood had cleared up completely. And my refreshed state of mind also pierced through my heart.

"I'd never thought that I'd offer up another prayer to the gods again— —"

Louie tried to smile wryly but gave up part-way through and looked off to the side.

"This is my fault. You fell into such a deep slumber because you healed the insect's poison that was running through my body."

I thought that it'd be too obvious if I lied and said it wasn't and was subsequently lost about how I should respond.

Right, I'd tried giving Louie a, er, blessing in an all-or-nothing gamble and it'd

miraculously worked. Right after that, I had a horrible headache and suddenly became incredibly sleepy. I doubt that they weren't connected.

My body had probably stopped working temporarily as a side effect of forcing myself to use the power Olin and Silvai had given me without knowing its characteristics or how to use it.

It might be that my power wasn't suited for detoxification.

I see, I can make figuring out my power another task to take on as we travel. Olin's a god of war and Silvai's a primordial god who governs over the wind and atmosphere, was it?

I was pretty sure that Silvai had explained to me that my name, Hibiki, shared camaraderie with the atmosphere when I told him what my name was. Different gods ruled over different powers.

"And here I was supposed to be protecting you,"

Louie whispered painfully with his voice colored by regret.

You know, Louie. I didn't come to this world just to be protected.

For some reason, I couldn't get the words out of my mouth when I saw Louie refusing to soften up his harsh gaze.

We headed out for the village of Urs after we finished getting ready.

When we finally got out of the creepy forest, we were met with the ever-unchanging gloomy wasteland.

I felt like my heart would dry up and crack just by looking at it. I felt cold not with my skin, but with my senses.

Louie said that he wanted us to reach the village in the afternoon and leave before the sun set as we traveled along the wasteland without another person in sight.

He said that we absolutely mustn't spend the night in the village because Reims appeared at night.

I had yet to see a Reim.....a person who had turned into a revenant, for

myself, so it didn't really hit me no matter how many times I was told that they were dangerous. Because of this, I couldn't abandon my initial opinion that it was better to turn as many Reims back human as possible.

But Louie seemed to be strongly bound in guilt over the fact that he felt that it was his fault that I had slept for an entire day. He was being even more cautious than he was before.

I pat Eru's fur as I grew impatient on the inside.

Eru, as I'd expected, still refused to let anyone else but me ride him.

He would let Louie on in emergency situations, though. I had Eru carry only me on his back for the time being, even though I felt guilty about it.

Louie, who was walking next to us, absolutely refused to look our way. The fact that our eyes never met while we were so close to each other made it all the more unnatural.

"Er, I'm sorry that I wasted so much time.....and about everything else."

I apologized for more things than just the fact that I'd slept for so long. Like the incident with the bugs, for one. And also about how I, well, did *that* to him without his consent even if it was only to cleanse him from the poison. It was inappropriate of me.

Blood rushed to my face as I remembered what I had done. I felt like I could faint from the shame alone.

I feel like I've done something bad to Louie, too. I'd feel really bad toward his wife, if he's a married man.....and then I got strangely depressed. It was a feeling that I couldn't quite explain.

But I didn't think that Louie considered me as a person of the opposite gender. He'd gotten my age wrong too.

"—Hibiki. I have a favor to ask of you."

".....What is it?"

"There's a high probability that we'll arrive at the village later than we planned at this rate."

“Is it too dangerous to go?”

“You wanted to see a map, right?”

“Yeah.”

Louie looked like he was deep in thought for a bit.

“I’ll go to the village and get a map. Can I ask you to stay on standby outside of the village with the sacred beast while I do?”

I cleared away the conflicting thoughts in my head, switched gears, and glared a little at Louie.

“A map isn’t the only thing I want to see.”

My voice sounded horribly stiff in the midst of Eru’s and Louie’s footsteps, the only other thing I could hear.

“What else would you like?”

I found it difficult to answer. There were a great many number of things that I wanted to see.

Like the atmosphere and smells that you couldn’t touch with your hands —all of it. I wanted to learn more about this world with all of my five senses.

Like the houses, stores, public facilities, and fields that were likely to be found in the village. I wanted to see the foundation of people’s daily lives here and see how much it differed from my own world with my own eyes. It was something important I’d have to learn for my mission.

It was a bit too much to tell me to wait outside without entering the village.

At that rate, I would lose sight of why I’d come to this world in the first place.

“I’ll bring back everything that you want to see.”

No, you’re wrong!

I don’t only want to see things that have a definite shape.

I hung my head down low. I felt like the vague apprehensions that I’d had before we departed had proven to be true.

The promise that I’d forced Louie to swear to me. That he wouldn’t sacrifice

himself to save me. I'd been afraid that he'd break that promise one day, and I felt like that day was creepy closer to reality.

"Louie, can we talk about something important for a bit?"

I took a deep breath and turned around while still on top of Eru. Eru hardly moved up or down as he walked, so I wouldn't fall off even if I sat sideways.

"Hibiki, it's better for you to sit facing the front..."

"Our conversation comes first."

Louie had evidently realized that things were about to go unfavorably for him. I looked at Louie as he tried to change the topic and cut him off with in slightly harsh tone.

"I'm going to the village with you. I won't back down on that one."

"Hibiki."

Louie finally looked me in the eye, probably because he had little other choice. Even still, it relieved me more than I had expected. Even though he *did* look sullen.

"You can't go off somewhere dangerous by yourself!"

"—And what if something were to happen? I, at the very least, know how to protect myself. But you..."

"No! I won't listen."

I didn't know how to use a sword and it was doubtful that I'd be able to fend for myself. There was nothing I could say if Louie pointed that out.

"I want you to understand that I'm not trying to make light of you. I just don't want you to get hurt."

Louie abruptly looked away again. His profile was filled with an emotion that was a dark as fear.

"I feel the same way too, you know."

I wanted him to understand. It hurt so much to be alone in the leisure of safety that it made me want to cry.

"I wouldn't be able to bear it, Hibiki—I don't care if my tongue burns off or if I'm robbed of my vision. As long as you're safe, that's all I..."

You're being serious, aren't you, Louie?

You don't care about your own life at all.

"I won't be safe."

I cut Louie off because I couldn't bear it either.

"My body might be safe, but what about my heart? Louie, you're only worried about my body. Does my heart not matter at all?"

Louie furrowed his brows a little as resistance alighted his face. I continued,

"Louie, you're protecting me by sacrificing yourself for me. My body might not get physically wounded when you do, but my heart hurts a lot. I keep asking 'why, why?' and it really hurts, like I'd been cut multiple times."

I grew irritated. I couldn't express my feelings in words without sounding like an immature child.

But Louie, it might sound like what a child would say, but it's how I really feel.

"It obviously hurts when I get physically wounded too, but I still want to stay with you and be useful."

"No. You can't."

Louie made his refusal all to clear and turned his sharp gaze to me.

"Why not?"

"—I couldn't bear it if you fell asleep like that again. As long as I can still hear your voice, that's all I..."

"I think they're the same. The reason why you're so worried about me, Louie, is probably the same thing that makes it so painful for me."

"Then do you expect me to not feel anything when I watch you get injured?"

"But it's not okay for you to be the only one to get hurt, Louie."

"You don't understand how cruel it is to survive in this country."

The color of reproach appeared in Louie's moon-colored eyes. It felt like he

was close to losing his temper and was questioning what I could possibly know about how cruel it was.

"But, Louie. I promised Olin and Silvai. That I'd turn everyone back human. The gods sacrificed themselves to send me here. But then, if I let you sacrifice yourself for me too, then just what—does that make me?"

Eru suddenly looked back as if in consideration for me. I continued, "I definitely don't want you to ultimately be the only one getting hurt, Louie, just because I wasn't using the power they gave me as much as I could."

Louie bit down on his lip and glared at me intensely.He was exceptionally intimidating and was quite scary. If I'd met him looking at me like that in any normal situation, I'd definitely run away screaming. I began again,

"there's so many things that I don't know about this world that I want you to teach me about, Louie. I want to see a lot of different things, gain a lot of different experiences, and slowly learn things little by little so that I won't mess up, so that I won't accidentally do something stupid again and cause you more trouble."

"I'll teach you whatever it is that you want to know."

Louie was obstinate. Was I the one who had made him like this? I didn't know what else I could say.

--I had to prove myself with my actions, not my words.

And I had failed. The fact that I had fallen asleep for an entire day had made Louie all the more uneasy. He was someone who feared loss above all else.

How do I reassure him that I won't disappear anymore?

We proceeded in silence for a little while after that. The brutal landscape was so unchanging that I began to hate it. All it did was to spur on this gloomy atmosphere.

".....? Louie, there's something over there."

Something blackish protruded out here and there from the discolored surface.

"Oh, those are probably stone monuments..... Sorcerers cast a spell to try to prevent the earth from drying up when the kingdom began to fall into ruin. They're probably the remains of the spell,"

Louie explained indifferently. I had Eru walk toward them after a brief moment of hesitation.

I guess they really were stone monuments. They were somewhat whitish, like granite. There was something that looked like words carved into their surfaces, but they were so cracked and dirty that I couldn't make any sense out of them.

"There's quite a lot of them."

I got off of Eru and meticulously checked out each one.

"—These stone monuments are strange. They've been carved out on purpose. Why is that?"

My breath caught when I turned around to ask Louie.

"Louie?"

I trembled. Louie, who should have been right behind me, was nowhere in sight.

"Eru!"

My voice was colored with fear. Neither Louie nor Eru were here. I hurried around a corner of monuments as I searched for them.Nothing had even happened, I had simply been unable to see them from the other side of the monuments.

I was exasperated by how much I'd panicked as I ran toward Louie, who was standing around just a little farther away.

".....?"

It was strange, Louie's gaze right now—I should be in his line of sight, but he wasn't reacting. I recalled how it had been when I'd first met him in the interworld. He didn't notice my presence and was looking right through me.

"He does not see you."

"!?"

Someone's voice suddenly echoed by my ear. A hand reached out covered my mouth from behind before I could turn around to see who it was.

"This is the place where we bet our lives on our spell. Ahh, but there still isn't enough power for it. The land will not turn back. The kingdom is falling to ruin....."

I broke out in goosebumps. I heard weeping in every direction. Strange human-like "hazes" stood by the stone monuments.

I looked down at the hand covering my mouth even as I trembled. For a moment, I was reminded of the chair of small monkeys that Fortune had set up. My hands and feet had been bound, and my voice had been sealed off.....but this wasn't like the monkeys at all. It was a skinny, branch-like hand with a faint silhouette. It was like it belonged to a ghost, and not a person—.

Louie had said something about sorcerers earlier. Could these possibly be their residual thoughts?

I shook off the hand in a hurry. Then, I heard voices of regret reverberating around me.

Voces that cursed their fate, voices of lament, voices of hatred—and the voices of those who wept while thinking of their families.

My heart jumped.

Family.

The images of my parents, who I'd been trying not to think about because I had a mission here, suddenly came into my mind. The human-like hazes who wept while thinking of their loved ones blocked the way before me the very moment I stopped breathing.

I was in a daze. In those translucent hazes.....in the shimmer of space they created, I saw that a faint image of something completely different was overlapping with the scenery here. That something was a scene that I couldn't believe was real.

—.....Mom, Dad?

I desperately took a closer look. There was no doubting that I was seeing my

parents facing each other at the dinner table.

—*Why!?*

How was I seeing a scene with my parents here? I somehow managed to keep myself from crumbling down by tensing up my hands and legs.

It shouldn't have been possible. *This must be an illusion, just something that was created by my desires.....*and I had a flash of inspiration as I thought. This was a place where the remains of sorcery lingered. In other words, were the two worlds being connected together, like how they had been in the interworld forest, by the residual thoughts and power that had piled up and mixed together here?

And if I was right, did that mean that this haze had become a gateway connecting to my world?

—*.....Can I go back home?*

My body refused to budge even though my heart was being drawn forward. The dinner table was cold. My parents weren't talking to each other, as usual. Nothing had changed, regardless of whether I was there or not. Nothing at all!

I grew angry and bit down on my lips so hard it began to bleed when my eyes suddenly caught sight of the dishes on the dinner table.

There were three people's shares of food. Mom's, Dad's, and—mine?

“__”

Something pierced deep through my heart. I felt like it'd burst open.

I want to go home.....I want to go home!! My wish resounded throughout my entire body. If I reached out and leapt with all my might, would I be able to return to that scene?

And if I did, wouldn't they surely hold me in their arms even if they were bewildered?

I should have told them how I really felt without putting up a brave front and without being stubborn! Even if it meant that my parents would chose to take different paths from each other, I could have made the bonds between us more certain.

I had simply been running away because I didn't want to face the fact that I was hurting.

I wanted to do it all over. I knew I could open up my heart to them now. And tell them about everything I'd yearned for but couldn't say out loud.

—But.

If I looked away a little, I could also see the figure of a single lonely knight standing in shock. Louie. It looked like he, too, was seeing something inside of the peculiar haze.

I looked back and forth between my family and Louie.

What should I do?

Which should I choose?

The warm world were my parents, whom I truly loved, were? Or the warped, hopeless world filled only with despair?

"Even if you tell me to choose....."

I made a fist and raised up my head.

"—I've already decided. I won't run away. I've made a promise."

I turned away and ran. To where I wished to be—to *him*.

Louie, who had been frozen until then, suddenly began to move before I reached him.

He grasped the hilt of the large sword at his back and slid it out of its sheath. His relentless eyes were colored by grim resolve.

I gulped as the silver blade flew. It flashed as if to cut me in half in one blow as I drew closer.

"!?"

No, he was cutting the "haze" that shimmering next to me. Louie, too, had chosen this lonely and painful reality over the undoubtably heartrending scene he had seen in the haze!

His sword had beaten away the last remaining traces of the powers that the

sorcerers had left behind here.

Multiple fierce screams gushed out and circled the area. Voices that cursed their fate, voices of lament, voices of hatred.....they call circled around like a muddy stream.

The space around us wavered. The whirlpool of voices made the sleeves of my robes flutter one last time before flowing up into the sky and disappearing.

Silence returned to the area. I saw a panicked Eru drawing closer from the corner of my eye.

“Louie!”

His moon-colored eyes finally saw me when I shouted. His large sword fell from his hands in his surprise and clattered to the ground.

“—Hibiki.”

His arms wrapped around in more in confusion than to pull me closer.

Louie wasn’t a part of my family and was someone from a different world than I was.

But even still, we’d met and taken each other’s hands. Our fates had connected.

I won’t get it wrong this time. I wanted to move forward while accepting all of the things I’d been ignoring until now without looking away.

So please, I want to see the same scenery as you, okay?

“I——want to be with you, Louie.”

I could tell that Louie had forgotten to breathe for a moment. There were so many things I wanted to say to him, who was always surrounded by such loneliness.

“Louie, you regret the fact that you’re the only survivor a lot. That’s why you feel like it’s only natural for you to get hurt. It even looks like you don’t care if you die. But I don’t want that! Even if you don’t care about your life, Louie, it’s extremely precious and important to me. If you ever throw your life away, I’ll be sure to go and take it right back.”

I couldn't get the right words out. It was because hadn't really ever put my true feelings to words up until now.

"I don't want you to shoulder things alone even if only painful things happen from now on, Louie, and as long as we can both shoulder it together and say that it's okay even if it hurts, then that's....."

Argh, everything I'm saying is a total mess and completely off-topic, isn't it? Why is it so hard to be honest about your feelings?

"Er, I can't do anything useful at all, and I'm always making you angry, Louie, and I'm really, you know..."

What's "you know" even supposed to mean?! I asked myself. Geez, even my words are coming out weird!

"So I'm really glad I met you, Louie. I want to stay by your side. Even when it's dangerous. Especially when it's dangerous, actually. So, let's get hurt together, okay?! Let's worry about and be worried over by each other since we can't do that unless we're both there..... wait, we should still make it our first priority to be careful and not get hurt in the first place!"

I started to go in circles the more flustered I became.

But, couldn't we? I felt like I was about to be scorned for being too naïve, for not understanding anything. I was hoping that he would chalk it up to our difference in age and tolerate my words with an open mind.

"I want to see the same scenery as you and I want to learn a lot about everything from you, or something like that."

I could go home with my head held high if I gave it my all here. I could proudly tell my family that I was helpful to someone.

Then, my parents might even smile again like they used to a long time ago.

"So let's keep spending more time together like this and——ehh?"

I made a strange sound in the middle of my sentence.

Louie had tightened the arms he had wrapped around me. I was pulled up to my tip-toes.

I could hear his heart beating right next to me. It was beating fast.

This was the sound of life. I calmed myself down and listened closer.

This world was endlessly broken. But even so, there was still someone who's heart was beating so vibrantly right by my side.

“—I wouldn't be able to go on. Not if I lost you.”

“Louie?”

“I'll protect you. No matter what I have to give up in return.”

His arms trembled a little around my back.

I felt like my heart had begun to beat louder, perhaps because it was copying Louie's.

“Oh, Louie—look over there.”

I cast my gaze upward. To the gloomy, frozen sky.

And to the singly ray of light that shone through it.

Louie let go of me as if he was surprised and turned to face the light.

It was a thin and unreliable ray of light. It looked like it would be covered up again by the clouds at any moment. But that shining light looked like a ray of hope to me. I'm sure that Louie felt the same.

It was like the sky was pouring its blessings down on the earth, on my oath, and on Louie's choice.

I grew happy and grasped Louie's hand tightly. Eru, who had been loitering around the area, pushed the tip of his nose against my other arm and fawned over me.

I pat Eru's face and looked up to the light in the sky again.

—*It's not broken. This world hasn't fallen yet!*

It'd only just begun. I looked forward with my sword grasped tightly in my hand.

Now, let us take a stand against fate.

Afterword

Hello, or nice to meet you, I'm Tamaki Itomori.

"F" is a novel that is still currently in serialization online and was published into a book.

It's a maiden's war chronicle.....where the main character steadily overcomes trials on a stage that begins with destruction. I like writing about girls who fight.

It's a novel that is being made public at the same time that it is being set up online, so a lot of my feelings have been packed into this.

When I first starting writing, I had never imagined that there would come a day when it became a single book and was lined up in a bookstore. I really have strong feelings about it. Thank you, Kadokawa Beans Bunko.

Even as I am writing the afterward like this, somehow my strange feelings continue. You never know what will happen in life, and it is a continuation of surprises.

It is a story filled with whips at every turn in the Itomori-style, but I would like to combine it with elements of hearts throbbing and elements of beasts and carefully, cautiously move forward with it. I would be happy if you felt your hearts beat in excitement along with the main character.

And finally, a word of thanks.

I am indebted to the people in charge this time as well. I was able to finish this book because of your support. Thank you very much.

Susunosuke-sama, who drew the illustrations. Every illustration was lovely, from the cute expressions to the brilliant dark colors. I cannot resist the beautiful ambience that keeps me from having my eyes stolen away. Thank you so much for giving the characters a heartbeat.

I also give my heartfelt gratitude to everyone in the Kadokawa Beans Bunko editorial department, the bookstores who sold my books, my family who supported me, and everyone who assisted me.

And I give my thanks to the readers who read "F" back in its online days.
Nothing would make me happier than if you stayed with it from here on out.

I hope that all of the readers who read this for the first time in this book will have fun.

Hoping to see you all again.

Tamaki Itomori
